Aarion Veylan And The Whispering Spire

BY

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Preface

Magic isn't always gentle. It doesn't always glimmer softly like the songs say. Sometimes it roars, wild and unshaped. Sometimes it breaks what it touches and leaves the pieces for someone else to pick up.

In Eldervale, the old balance between water, fire, and shadow has split wide open -and the crack runs deeper than anyone dared to imagine.

That's where Aarion Veylan's life tipped sideways. One day he was just a boy, living in a small town where nothing strange ever happened. Then the sky turned a terrible crimson, the shadows poured in, and everything he thought he knew burned away.

Now he's walking paths he never asked to tread, alongside people who might be friends… or might not. There are creatures here pulled from the dusty corners of half-forgotten legends, places that are beautiful in the kind of way that makes your chest ache, and dangers that creep in when you least expect them.

This isn't only a story about spells and battles. It's about what you do when every choice looks wrong. It's about finding courage when you're out of it, and holding on to the kind of bonds that can turn one spark of hope into a fire that changes everything.

The Emberlight Express is waiting. Once it starts moving, you can't go back. So-take a breath. And step aboard.

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Dedication

This book is for my Mummy and Papa, whose love has been my rock and whose support gave me the strength to dream and the courage to write. It's also for my sister Vandita, who has been my guiding light and closest friend, and whose heart kept me going. It's also for my teacher Neha Ma'am, whose encouragement and wisdom made me believe in myself and never stop writing. Finally, it's for J.K. Rowling and her *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which first sparked my imagination and set me on the path to writing this story.

– CHAPTER ONE–

The Night of the Crimson Sky

The rice fields were restless that evening. A warm wind ran its fingers across the stalks, bending them like a thousand dancers swaying to a tune only they could hear. The sun was dipping low, gold bleeding into violet, when something strange happened. Aarion Veylan was near the irrigation ditch, tossing pebbles into the shallow water, each splash sending ripples toward the edge of the field. He was about to throw another when his gaze caught the far horizon. The familiar soft blush of sunset deepened unnaturally , orange fading to a sharp crimson that seemed to bleed across the clouds like someone had thrown paint across the clouds. His hand stilled. The pebble slipped from his fingers into the water without a sound. At first, he thought it might be the season's first great storm. But storms didn't turn the entire sky into a living wound. The color deepened still, burning hotter, richer, until it swallowed the soft tones of dusk entirely. The mountains in the distance became dark, jagged shadows against that blood -drenched canvas. Then came the sound. Low. Long. Mournful. A horn, deeper than

any he had ever heard. It wasn't the cheerful call of traders or the herald of a festival. This sound had weight, like the groan of a dying world. Aarion's heart gave a slow, uncertain thud. Somewhere behind him, crickets fell silent. Even the water in the ditch seemed to hold its breath. "Aarion?" He turned sharply. Nyssa Moonveil stood a few steps away, her wiry frame bent slightly beneath the bundle of sugarcane stalks cradled in her arms. Her dark hair clung to her cheeks in the humid air, and her chest rose and fell quickly ,not from the weight she carried, but from haste. She had run here. Her gaze was locked on the sky. "What… is that?" she whispered. Her voice was unsteady, like she was afraid that speaking too loud might make whatever this was notice her. Before Aarion could speak, his father's voice bellowed from their home. "Aarion! Inside, now!" Edran Veylan was not a man who often raised his voice. A veteran of border skirmishes, he carried the kind of calm that came from facing death and surviving. Which is why the sharp edge in his tone now made Aarion's blood run cold. But he couldn't move. His eyes were fixed on the line of trees beyond the rice paddies. Something vast shifted there,slipping between trunks like a shadow pretending to be solid. Shapes emerged against the crimson backdrop. At first, they seemed like enormous birds, gliding effortlessly without a single wingbeat. But no bird was that size. And no bird glowed faintly with a silver light that pulsed in the hollow sockets where eyes should be. Nyssa took a step toward him. "They're…

flying lower," she murmured. Aarion didn't answer. He felt the first touch of ash against his skin. It floated down in lazy spirals ,soft, gray flecks that clung to his hair and shoulders. Nyssa caught one in her palm, frowning. "Snow?" He shook his head slowly. "No… not snow." The wind shifted. The ash smell was sharp, metallic , iron mixed with something sweet and rotting. From somewhere to their left, a scream cut the stillness. High -pitched. Humans. And suddenly silent. The horn sounded again, closer this time, the vibration thrumming through Aarion's bones. Villagers began spilling from their homes. Mothers pulled children close, their eyes darting upward. Old men whispered to each other, voices quivering with half - remembered tales. Aarion's father was running now, boots kicking up dust. His leather jerkin was hastily strapped, his short sword slapping against his thigh. "Inside! Both of you!" But it was too late. From above, one of the gliding shapes dipped sharply, folding in on itself before slamming into the ground between them and the house. The earth shuddered. The creature that rose from the impact was wrong. Too tall. Too thin. Its limbs bent at angles that made Aarion's stomach twist. Its skin was like black glass, reflecting the crimson light in jagged patterns. And its eyes ,gods, its eyes ,were pools of molten silver, burning without heat. It opened its mouth. No roar came. Instead, a sound like rusted iron scraping over stone filled the air, drilling into Aarion's skull. Edran stepped in front of his son, one hand gripping his sword, the

other pushing Aarion backward. “Go,” he growled. The creature moved forward, each step cracking the dirt beneath its talons. A streak of motion cut across Aarion’s vision. A line of steel flashed under the crimson light, carving through the thing’s throat. The wound blazed briefly with pale fire , then the monster’s form shattered into a cloud of black smoke, which the wind scattered into nothing. Standing where it had been was a man clad in black armor. His breastplate was scarred and weather -worn, etched with faintly glowing runes that writhed as if alive. His hood shadowed most of his face, but the sliver of jaw Aarion could see was set with grim purpose. He didn’t spare a glance at Aarion. “They’re here for you,” he said in a low and flat voice. “Move.” Aarion’s mind spun. “What ,” Another beast vaulted from the roof of the neighbor’s storehouse, claws outstretched. The man moved faster than Aarion’s eyes could follow. In one motion, he grabbed Aarion by the arm and pulled him aside, his sword catching the creature mid -leap. This one did roar before it died ,an ear -split shriek that rattled windows. The moment it dissolved, the man didn’t stop moving. “Run,” he commanded. The village was n o longer a place of rice fields and evening peace. Fire licked at thatched rooftops. Shadows darted across the alleys. Somewhere, someone was praying, their voice breaking. Nyssa appeared from a side lane, face pale and streaked with ash. “Aarion!” she called, stumbling toward them. “Both of you ,keep running!” the man barked. And though

Aarion's feet finally obeyed, his eyes could not stop glancing back at the crimson sky, where more shapes were descending. Aarion had never known his village to be loud. Even during the harvest festivals, the noise was joyous , laughter, drums, flutes. But now, sound has become a weapon. The cries of the villagers crashed against each other, tangled with the roaring crackle of fire and the inhuman shrieks of the silver -eyed creatures. Roofs collapsed under unseen weight. Carts overturned, spilling grain into the dirt, only to be trampled by fleeing feet. The black -armored man did not slow. He weaved through the chaos with a precision that made Aarion stumble just trying to keep up. His grip on Aarion's arm was firm but not cruel ,just enough to make sure the boy didn't get left behind. Nyssa ran on Aarion's other side, clutching a short knife she'd drawn from somewhere, her knuckles white around the hilt. "Where are we going?" she shouted over the din. "Out," the man replied, never looking back. His voice was like the blade in his hand ,sharp, cold, cutting through the noise without effort. But getting out was easier said than done. From the rooftops, more of the creatures crawled down, their movements like spiders skittering along the edges of vision. One dropped directly in their path, blocking the narrow lane. Its silver eyes locked on Aarion instantly. The man pushed the boy behind him and raised his sword. The air shimmered faintly around the blade, as though heat were rippling off it. The creature lunged. The man sidestepped with almost casual

grace, the runes on his sword flaring. Steel met obsidian flesh, carving deep, and the monster recoiled with a sound like grinding stone. Nyssa grabbed Aarion's sleeve. "Move!" They darted past while the man finished it, the thing's form breaking apart into drifting smoke that was quickly lost to the ash -thick wind. Everywhere they turned, the village was unrecognizable. A small shrine near the well ,once painted bright yellow and adorned with garlands ,was now cracked in half, the statue's face missing. Chickens scattered wildly, flapping into the firelight only to vanish into the shadows. And the horn. Gods, the horn. It sounded again, so close now that Aarion felt it in the pit of his stomach. It was no longer a call ,it was a claim. Whatever had come here was not searching anymore. It had found what it wanted. Him. They turned a corner, and Aarion's breath caught. The street ahead was littered with bodies. Men and women he had known all his life ,neighbors, friends ,lay sprawled in unnatural angles. The silver -eyed creatures prowled among them, sniffing at the fallen, their long fingers twitching. One of them raised its head slowly. Its gaze locked on Aarion, and something passed between them ,an awful recognition. The man stepped forward, blocking Aarion's view. His sword pointed directly at the creature. "Go back to your master," he said, his voice almost a growl. The creature did not obey. It snarled, and in the same instant, two more emerged from the smoke behind it. Nyssa's breath hitched. "We can't fight all of them!" "We don't need to," the man replied. "We just

need to keep moving." And then he moved ,like a shadow striking. The first creature fell before it could even close the distance, its form scattering into nothing. The second took a blow that shattered its leg, giving them an opening to sprint down the next lane. The third creature followed. Its speed was inhuman, its limbs stretching unnaturally as it bounded across walls and roofs to keep pace. Aarion could hear its claws clicking on the stone above him. Without thinking, he grabbed Nyssa's arm and pulled her toward the cover of an old granary, its doors hanging ajar. They darted inside just as the creature dropped from the roof, landing where they had been seconds before. The granary smelled of dried grain and dust. It was dark, the only light coming from cracks in the wooden walls. Aarion's heart pounded so loudly he was sure the creature could hear it. Outside, the black -armored man engaged the monster alone. The fight was brutal ,each strike shaking the ground, each roar tearing through the narrow street. Aarion wanted to run to help, but his legs refused to move. He had never seen such violence up close. When the sounds stopped, silence returned like a held breath finally exhaled. The man stepped into the granary doorway, his blade darkened with something that wasn't quite blood. "On your feet," he ordered. They obeyed. Outside again, the air felt heavier. More ash. More fire. The crimson sky above was now streaked with black, like ink spreading in water. And in the distance, over the rooftops, Aarion could see more of those silver glows approaching.

“We’re not going to make it,” Nyssa said quietly. The man finally looked at her ,really looked ,and his tone softened, just slightly. “We will. But you both have to trust me.” Aarion swallowed hard. Trusting a stranger was madness. But then again, so was staying here. The air had turned into fire. It clung to Aarion’s skin, not with heat alone but with a suffocating weight, as though the crimson sky above had descended to crush the village flat. The narrow lanes were rivers of ash and smoke, and the shadows that moved through them were no longer human. The black -armored man led them without hesitation, cutting through side streets and courtyards that Aarion barely recognized through the haze. Every turn felt wrong ,familiar homes warped by flame and ruin. A child's doll lay abandoned near a toppled cart, its cloth face smeared with soot. A single chicken darted past, wings flapping desperately, before disappearing into the darkness. Somewhere behind them, the horn sounded again. It was close enough now that Aari on could hear the faint metallic undertone in its call, like it was being blown through something not meant for human hands. The sound made his teeth ache. “Faster,” the man said. They ran past the central square, or what was left of it. The merchant stalls were reduced to blackened skeletons, their wares ,spices, cloth, tools ,scattered and burning. One stall still smoldered with a sweet, sticky smell that made Aarion’s stomach churn. The fountain at the square’s center was cracked in half. Its basin was filled, not with water, but with a dark,

rippling liquid that reflected the silver eyes of a creature crouched at its edge. It saw them. The thing's head tilted slowly, unnaturally, like a crow examining its prey. Aarion froze. The man did not. In a single motion, he flung something from his belt ,a small glass orb. It struck the cobblestones with a sharp crack, releasing a burst of searing white light. The creature shrieked, recoiling, its claws scraping deep gouges into the stone. They didn't wait to see if it recovered. "Don't look back," the man ordered. Aarion didn't ,but he heard the creature's claws against the stone as it gave chase. Nyssa grabbed his hand and pulled him harder, her breath ragged. "We're not going to make it!" she gasped. "Yes, you will," the man said flatly. "If you listen." They veered sharply into a narrow alley, one so tight that Aarion's shoulder brushed the walls on either side. The smell here was different ,damp stone, rotting wood, and the faint tang of something metallic. When they emerged, the village's outer edge was in sight. Beyond the last row of houses lay open fields, and beyond them, the dark line of the forest. But between them and freedom stood four of the silver - eyed creatures. They did not rush forward. They waited, their heads turning in eerie unison. The man stopped. For the first time, Aarion saw him hesitate. "What now?" Nyssa demanded, her voice shaking. The man turned to Aarion. "Your hand," h e said. "What?" "Give me your hand." Confused, Aarion extended it. The man took it in his own gloved grip and turned the palm upward. And then Aarion saw it , a faint glow. Two

interlocking rings, etched into his skin as if they had always been there but only now decided to wake. Aarion yanked his hand back instinctively. “What is that?” “That,” the man said, eyes narrowing, “is why they’re here.” The horn sounded again ,so loud now that the ground trembled beneath their feet.. The man’s grip tightened on his sword. “Stay behind me. No matter what happens.” The creatures began to move. They advanced slowly, their taloned feet scraping across the dirt with an unholy patience. The silver in their eyes flared brighter with each step, casting ghostly light across their jagged, glass -like skin. Ash swirled around them in lazy spirals, drawn to their presence as if the air itself bent to their will. The black -armored man shifted his stance, feet planting wide. His free hand rested lightly against the hilt of a dagger sheathed at his side. He wasn’t just preparing to fight ,he was calculating. Aarion’s mouth had gone dry. He could feel Nyssa’s hand trem bling in his, and though she was trying to keep her voice steady, her whisper betrayed her fear. “They’re… waiting for something.” “They always do,” the man replied without turning. “They want him to be afraid. Fear makes the bond easier.” Aarion blinked. “Bond? ” The man didn’t answer. The lead creature let out a sound ,low, guttural, almost like a speech ,but warped, layered with echoes that scraped against the mind. The other three responded in kind, their heads tilting in perfect unison. Then they attacked. Two came straight for the man, moving faster than Aarion thought

possible. The other two split, one circling toward Aarion and Nyssa, the other climbing a nearby roof in a series of inhuman leaps. “Back!” the man barked, swinging his sword in a tight arc that met the first creature mid -leap. The runes on the blade flared white -hot, searing through obsidian flesh. The impact threw sparks into the air, the smell of scorched stone mixing with the acrid tang of ash. Aarion barely had time to register the kill before the roof above them groaned. The fourth creature launched itself downward. Nyssa yanked Aarion sideways, and they both tumbled into the dirt as the beast landed where they’d been a heartbeat earlier, claws gouging furrows into the ground. Its eyes locked onto Aarion instantly. It lunged , ,and something inside Aarion snapped . Heat surged up his arm, flooding his chest like molten metal. His vision narrowed to the creature’s glowing eyes, and for a moment, he felt as though the world had slowed. The two interlocking rings on his palm blazed with fierce light, casting a harsh orange glow across the monster’s face. The creature hesitated. That was all Nyssa needed. She drove her small knife into the thing’s side ,not deep enough to kill, but enough to make it reel. Aarion scrambled back, clutching his burning hand against his chest. “What was that?” Nyssa hissed. “I… I don’t ,” He didn’t get to finish. The man was suddenly beside them, his armor streaked with black smoke. “Move. Now!” They broke into a run, dodging between burning houses. The remaining creatures followed, relentlessly. No matter how fast they ran, the sound of

claws against stone never faded. The man led them toward the open fields, cutting down any beast that strayed too close. But Aarion noticed his movements slowing ,not in speed, but in weight. His swings were growing heavier, his breathing sharper. They reached the last line of houses. Beyond lay the narrow strip of farmland before the forest. But the creatures were closing in from both sides , their silver eyes glinting through the smoke. “We’ll never outrun them!” Nyssa cried. The man turned to Aarion. “Use it.” “What?” “The Mark. Use it.” “I don’t know how!” Aarion shouted. “You already did,” the man snapped. “When you hesitated, it answered . Do it again ,only want it this time.” Aarion didn’t understand what that meant. But the pounding in his chest, the heat in his palm ,it was there, waiting. He focused on it, imagining the same blinding light as before. It answered. Flame erupted ,not from his hand, but around them, bursting from the ground in a sudden circle of fire. The creatures shrieked, recoiling from the heat. The flames didn’t burn the grass; they burned the air itself, twisting it into waves of orange and gold. “Go!” the man ordered. They sprinted through the gap. The forest loomed ahead ,dark, ancient, and unwelcoming, but better than the village behind. Aarion risked one last glance over his shoulder. The creatures stood at the edge of the fire, watching. The silver in their eyes dimmed to a cold glimmer, but they didn’t retreat. They simply waited, as if certain they would see him again. And beyond them, the village burned. The

rooftops collapsed under the weight of fire, sending embers spiraling into the crims on sky. People screamed, fought, fell. Aarion's home was gone, swallowed by smoke and shadow. Something in him broke, but there was no time to mourn. The man pushed him forward into the trees. "This is only the beginning," he said. The horn sounded one last time, muffled by the forest, and the night swallowed them whole. The fire circle flickered wildly, casting shadows that danced like writhing specters. Aarion's chest heaved, his legs trembling beneath him ,not from the run, but from the power he'd just called without understanding. The heat from the flames was both alien and familiar, as if it belonged to him and yet threatened to consume him whole. The creatures hissed in unison, their silver eyes narrowing. The flames reflected off their obsidian bodies, distorting their shapes into something even less human. They paced at the edge, testing the fire with clawed hands. The moment their blackened fingers brushed the air above the flames, the heat forced them back. The black -armored man ,still holding his sword ready ,glanced at Aarion. "You did well." Aarion could barely form the words. "What… what was that?" "You'll find out soon enough," the man said, scanning the tree line. "But not here." A scream erupted somewhere behind them ,raw, desperate, and cut short. Aarion's stomach churned. That voice… he recognized it. Mrs. Tavra, the old woman who sold herbs at the market. Before the thought could root deeper, one of the creatures shrieked. The sound

was deafening, shattering the brief lull. Then it leapt ,not over the flames, but into them. The fire roared angrily, but the creature forced itself through, its body twisting as the heat blackened and cracked its surface. It landed on all fours, smoke pouring off it in thick streams. “Run!” the man barked. They bolted. Aarion could hear the creature behind them, its claws digging into the dirt with relentless speed. Another scream rang out from the village, followed by the sound of splintering wood. They tore across the farmland, the tall stalks whipping against their legs. The forest was close now ,Aarion could smell the damp earth and moss even over the smoke. But the silver -eyed monster was closer still. Nyssa glanced back and cursed under her breath. “It’s gaining!” The man slowed suddenly, pivoting to face the pursuing beast. His runed blade met its lunge, the impact ringing like a struck bell. The creature’s claws scraped across his breastplate, throwing sparks into the night. Aarion and Nyssa stump led to a halt, watching the blur of steel and shadow. The man ducked under a sweeping strike, driving his dagger deep into the creature’s side. It shrieked, but instead of retreating, it drove forward harder. The two figures crashed to the ground, rolling in a violent tangle of limbs. Aarion’s breath caught. For a moment, he thought the man might not get up. Then the runes on the sword blazed brighter than before, and the creature’s body convulsed. With a final wrenching motion, the man severed its head. The silver eyes dimmed instantly, and its form crumbled into smoke. He

rose slowly, his armor dented and streaked with black residue. His breathing was heavier now, but his gaze was still sharp. “Go. The others won’t be far.” They sprinted again, breaking through the first line of trees. The forest swallowed them quickly, its canopy blocking most of the crimson light. The air here was damp, heavy with the scent of pine and wet soil. But the danger didn’t vanish. From deeper in the forest came the sound of snapping branches ,too deliberate to be the wind. Aarion’s pulse quickened. The man raised a hand, signaling them to stop. In the silence that followed, Aarion could hear his own heartbeat. Then… a whisper. Faint, almost human. “Aarion…” He froze. The voice was his mother’s. But she’d been gone for years. Nyssa’s eyes widened. “You heard that too?” Before he could answer, something moved between the trees ,tall, thin, silver -eyed. More of them. The man cursed under his breath. “They’ve followed us.” He shifted his stance again, ready for another fight, but this time, Aarion felt something different in the air. The forest itself seemed to tighten around them, branches curling downward, shadows thickening unnaturally. “They’re trying to pen us in,” the man said, scanning their surroundings. Aarion’s mark burned again ,hotter this time. He clutched his palm, trying to will the power to return. But the heat swelled too fast, too violently. The ground beneath them shuddered . With a loud crack, a fissure opened in the dirt, spitting out a plume of fire. The creatures recoiled instantly, their hissing more frantic now. Aarion

staggered back, his vision swimming from the heat. The man's voice cut through the haze. "Control it! Don't let it consume you!" But Aarion wasn't sure how. The fire felt alive, like a wild beast in his chest, clawing to get out. His knees buckled, and the edges of his sight darkened. Then a hand ,firm, steady ,gripped his shoulder. "Breathe," the man ordered. "With me. Now." He did. Slowly, painfully, the heat dulled, the flames drawing back into the earth until only the faint glow of his Mark remained. When Aarion could stand again, the creatures were gone. The man didn't relax. "They're not gone. Just waiting. They'll come again when the Mark flares." Aarion swallowed hard. "Then what do we do?" The man turned toward the deeper forest. "We keep moving. And you learn, fast." They pressed on into the dark, the village's glow fading behind them. Aarion didn't look back this time ,not because he didn't want to, but because he knew what he'd see would break him. The forest closed around them like a living wall. The light from the burning village faded quickly, swallowed by the towering pines whose branches tangled high above. Here, the air was cooler, thick with the scent of damp soil and rotting leaves. But it was not quiet. Somewhere deep within, the forest breathed. Aarion could hear it ,the subtle rustle of leaves without wind, the faint groan of old wood shifting in the dark. Shadows moved in ways they shouldn't, bending toward them as if listening. Nyssa slowed, glancing over her shoulder. "They're not following," she whispered. The black -armored man

didn't look back. "Not yet." His voice carried the kind of certainty that chilled Aarion more than comforted him. They walked in silence for a while, their footsteps muffled by thick moss underfoot. Every now and then, a shape would flit between the trees ,just beyond sight , vanishing the moment Aarion tried to focus on it. Finally, Aarion broke the silence. "Who are you?" The man's answer was simple. "Torric." "Just Torric?" Nyssa asked. "That's enough." It wasn't. Aarion had a thousand more questions, but the forest seemed to swallow them before he could speak. The oppressive weight of the trees pressed in from all sides, their trunks gnarled and scarred as if clawed by something enormous. After what felt like hours,Toric raised a hand. "Here." They had come to a hollow between two massive oaks, their roots twisting together like skeletal hands. The earth dipped here, forming a shallow basin sheltered from the wind.Torricknelt and brushed aside a layer o f leaves, revealing a stone slab etched with the same runes that glowed faintly on his sword. "Help me," he said. Nyssa and Aarion exchanged a glance but obeyed. Together they pushed the slab aside, exposing a narrow stairway descending into the earth. The air that rose from it was cold, smelling faintly of stone and something metallic ,like rain on iron. "This is one of the old places,"Toric said, leading the way down. The steps were slick with moisture, the walls close enough that Aarion's shoulders brushed them. After a dozen paces, they emerged into a low chamber lit by a faint blue glow. The light came

from crystals embedded in the walls, their surfaces pulsing gently like a heartbeat. Nyssa let out a low breath. “What is this place?” “A shelter,"Toric replied. “Built long before your village ever existed. Few know of it.” He removed his gauntlets, flexing his hands before turning to Aarion. “Let me see the Mark.” Aarion hesitated, but under Torric’s steady gaze, he extended his palm. The faint rings were still visible, though the glow had dimmed.Torricstudied it for a long moment. “You shouldn’t have woken it up this soon.” “I didn’t ,” Aarion began, but Toric cut him off. “You did. The Mark doesn’t flare without the bearer’s will, whether you understand it or not. And now…” He glanced toward the stairway, where the faint sound of wind ,or was it whispering? ,echoed down. “…now they will hunt you until they have it.” Nyssa’s brow furrowed. “What is it? What do they want with him?” Torric’s expression was unreadable. “The Mark is older than the kingdoms. Older than the war you’ve heard of in stories. It is a key… and a weapon.” Aarion’s stomach tightened. “A weapon for what?” Before Toric could answer, the blue crystals flickered. The whispering in the stairway grew louder. Torric’s head snapped toward the sound, his hand finding his sword. “They’ve found us.” The whispering grew sharper, less like the wind and more like many voices speaking at once ,overlapping, urgent, and wrong. Words in no tongue Aarion knew pressed against his ears, slipping into his mind like icy fingers. Nyssa backed toward the far wall, her hand tightening on her knife.

“They’re here, aren’t they?"Toric didn't answer ,he didn’t need to. He stepped toward the stairwell, sword in one hand, his other palm brushing the runes carved into the stone. At his touch, the markings flared briefly, a white pulse that raced along the walls. The whispering faltered. For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then the first claw scraped against the stone steps. A shape emerged from the darkness ,a silver -eyed creature, its body twisting unnaturally to fit through the narrow stairway. Behind it came another, and another, their movements like smoke forced into flesh. Aarion’s throat tightened. “They’re inside ,” “Stay behind me,”Torricsaid, his voice low but steady. The first creature lunged.Torricmet it halfway, steel colliding with black glass in a burst of sparks. The chamber filled with the ringing of metal and the shrieks of the beasts, each one so sharp As iron thought his eardrums might split. Nyssa moved to Aarion’s side, pulling him toward the far end of the chamber. “If this place was meant to be a shelter, it’s a bad one,” she muttered under her breath. “It’s not the place,” Aarion said without thinking. His gaze was locked on Torric. “It’s… me.” The Mark in his palm began to throb again ,not the burning surge from before, but a slow, insistent beat that matched the crystals’ pulse. The blue glow around the m shifted toward orange, each flash brightening with his heartbeat. One of the creatures broke past Torric, leaping straight for them. Nyssa shoved Aarion aside and slashed upward, her blade cutting shallowly into its arm. The thing shrieked and

lashed out, sending her sprawling. Aarion's vision narrowed. He didn't think ,he reached . The heat roared to life, spilling from his palm in a wave of fire that struck the creature full in the chest. It screamed, its body cracking under the sudden blaze before collapsing into a heap of smoke and cinders. Nyssa scrambled up, coughing. "You really have to teach me how to do that." But Aarion barely heard her. The fire hadn't come just from his hand ,it had come from everywhere . The walls, the air, even the ground seemed t o respond to him.Torric cut down the last of the creatures at the stairway and turned sharply. "Stop." Aarion blinked. "What?" "Pull it back. Now." He tried, but the heat resisted, curling in his chest like it wanted to stay. The Mark's glow flared brighter, and a faint, low hum began to fill the room.Torriccrossed the space in three strides, seizing Aarion's wrist. "Breathe," he commanded, his own hand closing over the Mark. The runes on his sword dimmed in unison, as if lending their strength to contain it. Slowly, painfully, the light receded. The crystals returned to their calm blue pulse, and the oppressive heat drained away. Aarion's legs gave out, and he collapsed against the wall. "What ,what happens if I can't stop it?" Aarion asked, his voice barely above a whisper.Torriclooked at him for a long moment. "Then the forest won't be the only thing hunting you. The fire will." Nyssa shook her head. "So what now? They know where we are. We can't stay here." "We won't,"Torric said. He glanced toward the stairway. "There's another way out. Deeper. But it's

not safe.” Before either of them could protest, he retrieved a small, rune-etched lantern from his pack. The light it cast wasn’t bright, but it clung stubbornly to the walls, pushing the shadows back just enough for them to see. He moved to the far side of the chamber and pressed his hand to a section of stone. A hidden panel shifted, revealing a narrow tunnel sloping downward into blackness. Nyssa eyed it warily. “And where exactly does that go?"Toric stepped into the opening. “To an old road… if it still exists. Follow me.” The tunnel was barely wide enough for one person at a time. The air here was colder, damp with the scent of old stone and something metallic, like the smell that had drifted up the first time they’d opened the shelter. The ground was uneven, broken in places by roots that had forced their way through centuries of rock. Behind them, faintly, came the sound of claws against stone again. “They’re following,” Aarion whispered. “They always will,"Toric replied. The tunnel closed behind them with the low grind of stone. Aarion had expected the sound to cut off the whispers entirely, but they clung to the edges of hearing ,muffled now, but constant. The passage sloped downward sharply, forcing them to half-walk, half -slide in places. The only light came from Torric’s rune -lantern, its glow throwing jagged shadows across the slick walls. Water dripped somewhere in the dark. Each drop echoed too loudly, making the space feel both endless and suffocating. Nyssa kept her knife in one hand, her free palm brushing the tunnel wall as if

needing something solid to ground herself. “How far does this go?"Torric didn't answer immediately. “Far enough,” he said at last. “If it hasn’t collapsed.” Aarion glanced over his shoulder. The darkness behind them was absolute, the tunnel swallowing their trail entirely. But then ,something moved. It wasn’t sound, exactly. More like the air shifted, growing heavier, colder. “Torric,” Aarion said quietly. “We’re not alone."Torric didn't stop walking. “I know.” The first scraping sound came from above them, faint but distinct ,claws on stone. Aarion froze, looking up just in time to see a crack in the ceiling widen, spilling a slow trickle of dirt and small stones. Something pale slipped through the gap. It wasn’t like the silver -eyed hunters. This one was smaller, thinner, its limbs long enough to touch both walls of the tunnel as it crawled upside down toward them. Its eyes glowed faintly green instead of silver, and its mouth… Aarion couldn’t decide if it was smiling or if its jaw was simply broken. Nyssa’s breath caught. “What is that?”Torricset the lantern down and drew his dagger in his off-hand. “Crawler.” The thing dropped silently to the floor between them and the tunnel’s exit, moving with insect -like jerks. Before Aarion could react, it lunged ,not at Torric, but at him. The Mark burned hot, instinct flaring before thought. Aarion thrust out his palm, a burst of orange light striking the creature mid -leap. It shrieked, its body twisting in midair before slamming into the wall. But instead of vanishing into smoke like the others, it clung to the stone, hissing.

“They don’t burn easily,"Toric warned, stepping forward. His blade moved in two quick arcs, severing the crawler’s head before it could leap again. The body fell limp, but its claws remained locked in the wall untilTorricpried them free. They kept moving, faster now. The tunnel narrowed further before opening suddenly into a chamber unlike anything Aarion had seen. The ceiling arched high overhead, lost in darkness. The walls were covered in carvings ,lines of symbols and shapes that pulsed faintly with the same orange light as his Mark. Some depicted battles between figures wreathed in flame and towering shadow -beasts. Others showed rings ,two interlocked, exactly like the symbol on his hand ,surrounded by what looked like a burning sky. Aarion reached out, his fingertips brushing the stone. The moment he made contact, heat surged up his arm. The carvings shifted. It wasn’t physical ,the stone didn’t move ,but the images seemed to change in his mind, filling with color and motion. He saw flashes of firestorms, a black sea boiling under a crimson moon, and a figure standing at the center ,its eyes the same shade as his Mark. He staggered back, gasping. Torric’s gaze was unreadable. “Don’t touch them again.” Nyssa frowned. “Why? What was that?” “They’re memories,"Torric said. “This place was made by those who bore the Mark before. Some say the walls remember their wars. Others say they’re warnings.” Aarion swallowed. “Which do you believe?"Toric glanced toward the far archway leading out of the chamber.

“Both.” They passed under the arch, and the tunnel began to rise again. The air grew fresher, carrying the faint scent of pine and rain. Finally, light appeared ahead ,not the flicker of fire, but the pale, silvery glow of the moon. They emerged onto a crumbling st one road overgrown with moss and vines. The forest stretched on both sides, the ancient path vanishing into darkness in either direction.Torricpaused, scanning the shadows. “We follow the road east. It will take us to the river, if it still runs.” Aarion glanced back at the tunnel entrance. The whispers were gone now, replaced by the distant hoot of an owl. For the first time since the sky had turned crimson, he felt a fragile thread of calm. But it didn’t last. From somewhere deep in the forest came the faint, metallic blare of the horn. The moonlight spilled across the ancient road like cold silver, painting the moss -covered stones in shifting shades. Aarion stayed close to Torric, each footstep echoing faintly in the stillness. The air here was cooler than in the tunnel, but there was a strange weight to it , as if the forest was holding its breath. Nyssa kept glancing into the trees. “Something’s following us,” she murmured. “I know,"Toric said without turning. Aarion tensed, scanning the shadows. He could n’t see anything, but sometimes the darkness between the trunks seemed too dark, holding shapes that swayed when the branches didn’t. They walked in silence for several minutes, their breaths visible in the cool air. Then it came ,a faint shift in the light, like the moon had blinked. A shape moved parallel to them in

the trees. It was huge, but its form was obscured by the darkness, as if the shadows themselves clung to it. Aarion caught the faint glimmer of an eye ,no silver, no green, but gold, burning faintly like a dying candle. Nyssa whispered, “Is that ,” “Don’t look at it,"Toric said sharply. The thing didn’t approach, didn’t make a sound. It simply kept pace with them, its gaze fixed on Aarion. Every few moments it would vanish entirely, only to reapp ear further ahead, waiting. Finally, the ancient road curved, leading them away from the thing’s path. Aarion glanced back once, against Torric’s warning, but the shadow was gone. “What was it?” Aarion asked quietly.Torricdidn’t answer right away. “A Watch er,” he said at last. “Old as the forest. They don’t take sides. But they remember.” “Remember what?” Nyssa asked. Torric’s eyes flicked to Aarion’s Mark. “The last time this road burned.” They pressed on. The trees thinned slightly, allowing more moonlight to touch the stones. Aarion’s gaze kept drifting to the carvings on the road itself ,symbols faintly visible under the moss. The moment his eyes lingered, the Mark in his palm pulsed. The moss shimmered, and suddenly the carvings glowed faintly, outlining shapes: rings, fire, figures with their hands raised to the sky. Aarion slowed, his vision blurring. The road beneath him seemed to ripple, pulling him down into another place entirely ,one of firestorms and broken towers, a battlefield strewn with corpses. In the vision, he stood not as himself, but as someone taller, older, armored in red and gold. “Aarion!” Nyssa’s voice

dragged him back. He staggered, nearly losing his footing.Torricwas watching him closely, his jaw tight. “Don’t let it take you like that again. This road remembers more than you can handle.” Aarion wanted to ask what he’d seen, butTorrichad already turned eastward again. They walked until the distant sound of running water reached them. Relief washed over Aarion ,until the road brought them to the riverbank. The river was wide, its surface black under the moonlight, moving with a deceptive calm. An ancient stone bridge arched over it, half -collapsed in places. Vines hung down from its sides, swaying slightly though there was no wind. Nyssa frowned. “That doesn’t look safe.” “It’s the only crossing for leagues,"Torric said. He stepped onto the first stone slab, testing it with his weight. It held, but a low groan rumbled through the structure. They crossed one at a time. Aarion kept his eyes fixed ahead, but halfway across, something in the water caught his attention ,a ripple that moved against the current. It was following them.Toric seemed to sense it too. “Don’t stop. Don’t look down.” The ripple grew faster. Aarion’s pulse quickened. When he reached the far side, Nyssa right behind him, something broke the surface ,a pale, eyeless head, mouth opening in a silent scream before slipping back into the depths. “What was ,” Aarion began. “Another thing that remembers,"Toric said grimly. They continued down the road, the sound of the river fading behind them. But Aarion couldn’t shake the feeling that the Watcher in the forest and whatever swam beneath

that bridge were two halves of the same story , one he was somehow stepping into. And for the first time, he wondered if the Mark was n't just a weapon… but a summons. The road east of the river was quieter, but not peaceful. The forest here grew differently ,trees spaced farther apart, their trunks pale and smooth like bleached bone. The ground was carpeted in soft needles, muffling their footsteps until they sounded more like ghosts drifting than travelers walking. For the first time since the crimson sky, Aarion felt the ache in his legs, the pull in his lungs. The adrenaline that had carried him this far was burning out, leaving behind only exhaustion.Torricnoticed. "We stop soon," he said, scanning the tree line. Nyssa looked skeptical. "Here? In the open?" "Not in the open,"Torric replied. He veered off the road, leading them down a narrow path that wound between thick undergrowth. After a short walk, they came to a shallow hollow beneath the roots of a fallen oak. The space was large enough to shelter them, its entrance half -hidden by hanging vines.Torricset down his pack and began gathering dry branches from the surrounding forest floor. Nyssa knelt to help, though her eyes kept darting toward the trees as if expecting silver glints in the dark. Aarion sank onto a mossy rock, letting the weight of the day finally settle. His mind replayed everything ,the crimson sky, the horn, the creatures, the tunnel carvings, the visions. Every memory carried the same thread: the Mark burning against his skin like an unspoken demand. Soon, a small

fire crackled in the hollow, casting warm light against the roots. The heat was a relief, but Aarion couldn't help noticing how the flames seemed to lean toward his side of the camp, flickering higher whenever he shifted his palm too close.Torricsat across from him, removing a strip of cloth from his arm to reveal a thin, pale scar. "You asked before who I am," he said. Aarion leaned forward. "My name isTorricKarthis. I was a sword for hire. Until Mark chose me." Nyssa's eyes widened. "You had it?"Toric shook his head slowly. "Not this one. There are others… marks for different essences. Mine was for the Bladewind. It gave me speed beyond normal men. But it burned out. They all do, eventually ,unless…" His gaze flicked to Aarion's hand. "Unless what?" Aarion pressed. "Unless the bearer becomes what the Mark was meant to make them. And that,"Toric said , his tone turning like cooled steel, "is what those things from the crimson sky are trying to stop." Nyssa broke the silence. "So they don't just want to kill him,they want to stop him from becoming… whatever it is?"Torricnodded once. "Because if he does , it changes the game. And they've been winning for a long time." Aarion stared into the fire. "And what if I don't want this?"Torric didn't look away. "Then you'll die. And worse , someone else will carry it, and the war will still come." The flames popped, sending a spray of sparks upward. Aarion looked at them, wondering if the fire would always remind him of what now burned inside him. The forest was still, save for the crackle of the fire. But

somewhere beyond the hollow, deep in the trees, a low sound rolled through the night ,not the horn, but something more primal. A long, drawn -out howl. Nyssa's hand went to her knife. "Wolves?"Torricshook his head slowly. "No. Wolves don't hunt with silence first." Aarion's stomach tightened. "Then what ," Before he could finish, the firelight dimmed, as if something huge had passed between them and the moon above. The firelight wavered again. This time it didn't recover fully,the flames bent unnaturally to one side, as though drawn by a breath they could not see.Torricrose silently, drawing his sword. The runes along its blade pulsed once, faint but sharp. "Stay close to the fire," he said without looking at them. Aarion obeyed, pulling Nyssa a little nearer to his s ide. His eyes strained against the shadows beyond the hollow. The vines hanging at the entrance swayed slightly ,not with wind, but with something brushing past them. The howl came again, closer this time. It was layered, a dozen voices rising and falling i n perfect unison. Aarion's skin prickled.Toric stepped toward the hollow's mouth, crouching low. "Eyes up," he murmured. Two pinpricks of silver light appeared between the trees. Then four. Then six. Nyssa's voice was a whisper. "How many ," "Enough to end us if we stay here,"Torric cut her off. The first creature broke from the treeline ,a shape lower to the ground than the silver -eyed hunters they'd faced before. Its limbs were corded with muscle, ending in hooked claws that dug into the soil. Its head was long, almost canine, but its

eyes burned with the same molten silver as the others. It prowled forward slowly, teeth bared, the glow in its eyes reflecting off the wet gleam of its fangs. Aarion's Mark pulsed hard, and without thinking he lifted his palm toward it. The creature froze mid -step, a low rumble building in its throat. Another silver -eyed beast emerged, then another, forming a half -circle around the hollow. Their movements were deliberate, almost coordinated. "They're testing the perimeter," Bhi ma said, shifting his stance. One of the creatures lunged suddenly, jaws snapping. Torric's sword met it halfway, the runes along the blade flaring white -hot as steel cleaved through flesh and bone. The beast's body collapsed in a spray of black mist, but the others didn't retreat. Nyssa hurled her knife at the nearest attacker, striking it in the neck. It yelped ,a sound far too human for its shape ,and staggered back into the dark. The Mark in Aarion's hand blazed brighter, the heat licking up his arm. He could feel something inside him responding to the pack's presence ,anger, sharp and fierce. The fire in the camp seemed to swell with him, flames reaching higher, casting jagged shadows across the roots. One of the creatures made a move toward Nyssa, and the fire leapt sideways, a sudden burst of heat forcing it back. Aarion staggered at the sensation ,it was like part of the flame had ripped itself from the ground at his command.Torricnoticed. "Good," he called over the chaos. "Don't hold it ,direct it!" "I do n't," Aarion started, but another beast lunged, and instinct took over.

The flames at the far side of the camp surged into a whip -like arc, striking the creature's flank and sending it tumbling into the undergrowth. The rest of the pack hesitated now, pacing, their silver eyes locked on Aarion. Then, as if some silent signal passed among them, they withdrew ,slipping into the trees without a sound. The sudden quiet was deafening. Aarion's breathing came fast, his palm still glowing faintly. Nyssa retrieved her knife, muttering, "I don't like how smart they are."Toric sheathed his sword but didn't sit. "They won't come again tonight. But they will return. And next time, they'll know what you can do." Aarion met his gaze. "Then what do we do?" "We move before dawn,"Torric said. The flames in the campfire settled back to normal, but Aarion couldn't shake the feeling that somewhere in the forest, those silver eyes were still watching. The forest was pale in the first light of morning, mist curling between the trunks like restless ghosts. The campfire had burned to embers, faint wisps of smoke rising into the cold air. Aarion woke to the sound of Torric packing their supplies. Nyssa was already on her feet, brushing damp moss from her tunic. Neither spoke much; the events of the night still hung over them like a weight. The pack had not returned, but their absence didn't feel like safety ,only a pause. "Eat,"Torricsaid, tossing each of them a strip of dried meat. "We travel until nightfall." Aarion chewed mechanically, his thoughts elsewhere. Every time he blinked, he saw silver eyes in the dark, and felt the rush of heat from his Mark. He could still

hear Torric's voice in the fight ,Don't hold it, direct it. They broke camp quickly. The road eastward was quiet, but signs of the previous night lingered: deep claw marks in the soil, broken branches, patches of scorched earth where Aarion's fire had lashed out. As they walked, Nyssa finally broke the silence. "Torric… What was last night?" Torric's gaze didn't leave the path. "A test. They wanted to see Mark in action. Now they know." "And the crimson sky?" Aarion asked. Torric's steps slowed. "It's an omen. It marks the opening of the Veil ,the space between our world and theirs. Once it burns red, they can cross freely." Aarion frowned. "And it will… stop?" "Not until the Veil closes,"Toric said. "And the Mark is the only thing that can do that." They walked in silence after that. The forest began to thin, and the sound of rushing water reached them once more ,not the river they'd crossed, but something broader. When they emerged from the treeline, the land dropped away into a wide valley. A river cut through its center, glinting in the morning sun, and beyond it ,on a distant rise,stood the ruins of a city. Tall spires jutted from the earth like broken teeth, their surfaces covered in the same carvings Aarion had seen in the tunnel. Even from here, he could feel the faint hum in his palm, Mark reacting. Nyssa let out a low breath. "That place is dead." "No,"Torricsaid. "It's sleeping. And if we're unlucky… it's dreaming of you." Aarion's gaze lingered on the ruins, the sunlight catching the faint shimmer of old stone. He didn't know what waited there, but something inside him ,something

tied to the fire in his blood ,pulled toward it. For the first time since the night began, he wasn't sure if the pull was his… or the Mark's. The wind shifted, carrying the faint echo of a horn from far beyond the horizon.Torricadjusted his grip on his sword. "Welcome to the war, Aarion Veylan.

– CHAPTER TWO–

The Emberlight Express

The wind in the valley had changed.

It wasn't just carrying the smell of damp moss and stone anymore. It carried… whispers.

Aarion walked betweenTorricand Nyssa, his boots crunching over cracked stones. The ancient road beneath them looked like it hadn't been walked on in years. Down below, the river snaked through the valley like a strip of silver. But Aarion's eyes kept drifting to the far rise , where the broken spires of an old city reached into the sky like blackened teeth.

The Mark on his palm pulsed. Once. Twice. Not painfully… but expectantly, like it was waiting for something.

"Eyes forward,"Toric said quietly. He didn't even look at Aarion when he said it.

Aarion turned his gaze back to the road, but the pull toward the ruins stayed. Like an invisible rope was tied around his chest, tugging him in that direction.

They walked in silence for a while, until the road dipped into a darker part of the forest. Here, the light was dimmer, the air thicker, and warmer. No birds. No rustling leaves. Just the crunch of their boots and that quiet, low hum Aarion could feel in his bones.

Up ahead, the road split , one way climbing toward shadow, the other dipping into a mossy hollow.

Torric didn't hesitate. He took the lower path.

"We're close," he said.

Nyssa glanced at him. "Close to what?"

"To the only safe way forward."

The hollow was like a bowl in the earth, with trees leaning in from all sides. The air shimmered faintly, as if heat rose off the ground , but Aarion knew it wasn't heat. This was magic.

The path ended at a wall of thick ivy.Torricstepped forward, pushing the leaves aside. Behind them stood a massive stone pillar, covered in carved spirals and constellations that seemed to shift if you stared too long.

Aarion tilted his head. "What is this?"

“An entrance,"Toric replied.

From inside his cloak,Toric pulled out a small brass object , an astrolabe. Tiny gears and moving arms ticked softly, the design so intricate it looked almost alive.

Nyssa raised an eyebrow. “Pretty. What’s it for?”

“It’s the key,"Torric said. “Attuned to the Emberlight.”

He placed the astrolabe into a hollow in the pillar. There was a click… then a deep hum that rolled through the ground.

The carvings lit up in warm gold, the glow racing over the stone like liquid light. The ivy shimmered , and began to disappear.

Aarion blinked. The wall of leaves was gone.

In its place…

A train platform stretched before them, bathed in faint gold. The air here was different, heavier, like stepping into a dream.

And above the entrance, the letters shifted until they formed words he could read:

PANDIT DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAY JUNCTION – PLATFORM 2¾

Villagers walked along the road above, but none of them even glanced down. To them, the hollow was still just ivy and stone.

The platform ended in a set of huge gates, and behind them… Aarion saw it.

The Emberlight Express.

It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Crimson and gold metal gleamed like it had been polished for centuries. Along its side, runes pulsed slowly, almost like a heartbeat. Steam hissed softly beneath it , not white, but shot through with tiny glowing embers. The windows glowed warm and golden, and inside he caught glimpses of impossible spaces: a library with floating books, a room filled with swirling snow, a compartment where the ceiling was a living night sky.

The train didn't just look alive. It felt alive.

Nyssa's voice was barely more than a whisper. "We're… getting on that?"

"Yes,"Torricsaid. "If we make it before the shadows do."

Aarion's head snapped toward him. "Shadows?"

"They're closer than you think."

The gates stayed shut.Torricgestured to Aarion.

"Your turn. The pillar will only open for the Mark-bearer."

Aarion stepped up to the stone. The Mark in his palm thrummed harder, answering to the astrolabe's glow. He pressed his hand to the center.

Golden light surged through the carvings. The gates groaned, then slid open with a deep, crystalline chime that echoed across the hollow.

From somewhere far behind them, deep in the forest, the horn sounded.

Closer now.

Torric's voice was sharp. "Inside. Now."

The horn's echo still hung in the air when Torric's hand tightened on Aarion's arm.

"Inside," he said again , quieter this time, but with the kind of urgency that made your chest tighten.

Nyssa didn't argue. She grabbed Aarion's sleeve and pulled him forward. The golden glow from the open gates spilled over them as they crossed into the platform. It wasn't warm light, not exactly , more like the memory of warmth, the kind that made you think of sitting near a fire on a winter night.

The moment they stepped through, Aarion felt it.

The air shifted.

It was heavier, thicker, charged with something that prickled along his skin like static.

He glanced back.

The forest outside looked… further away. The trees were hazy now, as if a sheet of glass stood between him and the world they'd just left. And in that haze… movement.

Shadows sliding between the trunks.

"Torric…" Aarion began.

"I see them,"Torric said.

One of the shapes stepped into the light. Silver eyes, tall, thin, its limbs bent at the wrong angles. It didn't rush forward. It just stood there, head tilting unnaturally slow, like a predator deciding if the cage in front of it would break.

Aarion felt the Mark in his palm burn hotter.

The creature's eyes flared in answer.

Torric shifted slightly, putting himself between Aarion and the gate. "Once we board, they can't follow. But until then…" He drew his sword. The runes along the blade pulsed like a heartbeat.

They moved quickly down the platform. The Emberlight Express loomed larger with every step, its polished metal skin catching the faint golden light and scattering it in ripples. Up close, Aarion could see that the runes etched along its side weren't still , they writhed gently, like glowing script written in a language that breathed.

Steam hissed from beneath the train, swirling into little clouds that drifted toward them, each one glowing faintly like it carried sparks trapped inside. When Aarion walked through one, it felt cool at first… and then warm, as if the air itself had briefly recognized him.

Nyssa slowed to look at the nearest compartment window. "Is that… snow?" she asked. Inside, a flurry of white drifted lazily over polished wood floors and velvet seats. A fox made entirely of frost curled on one of the benches, its breath coming in tiny puffs of crystalline air.

Aarion's mouth fell open. "How…?"

"Don't get distracted,"Torric cut in. "The shadows don't care how pretty it is."

A shriek split the air behind them.

Aarion spun.

The creature at the gate had stepped forward. The golden threshold rippled as it pushed against it , not quite crossing, but testing.

And then it smiled.

Torric swore under his breath. “Move.”

They broke into a run. The hum beneath the platform grew louder, a deep vibration that seemed to come from the train itself. The Emberlight Express wasn’t just waiting , it was impatient.

Aarion’s boots hit the polished wood of the final boarding platform. Here, the glow was brighter, reflecting off brass railings and ornate posts carved with twisting patterns of fire and cloud. A sign beside the door shifted its letters until they read:

DEPARTING: LUMINARIS

ALL PASSENGERS ABOARD

The train door slid open with a sound like a soft chime. Warm air spilled out, carrying scents Aarion couldn’t place , a mix of spiced tea, old paper, and something sharper, like the ozone after lightning.

Torric stepped aside. “You first.”

Aarion hesitated. “Why?”

“Because it has to recognize you,"Toric said simply.

Before Aarion could ask what that meant, the horn in the forest sounded again , closer, deeper, and this time followed by the distinct scrape of claws on stone.

Aarion didn’t wait. He stepped up into the train.

The moment his foot touched the floor inside, the Mark on his palm flared. Not painfully , but in a way that made the air around him brighten. The walls shifted slightly, as if the space was adjusting itself to him.

Nyssa followed, her eyes going wide as she looked around. “This is… not normal.”

The entry compartment was like stepping into a grand hall. Lanterns floated in the air, their light shifting through gold and crimson. The walls were lined with bookshelves, but the books didn’t just sit still , they rearranged themselves, pages fluttering as if whispering to each other. A staircase at the far end curved up toward what looked like an observatory dome filled with stars that didn’t match any Aarion had ever seen.

Torric entered last. The door slid shut behind him, sealing with a soft click. Immediately, the sound of the horn outside dulled, as if the train’s walls swallowed it.

“They can’t get in now,"Toric said, sheathing his sword.

Aarion let out a slow breath. “What is this place?”

Torric's gaze swept over the compartment. "This… is the Emberlight Express. And it's going to take us to Luminaris Academy."

Nyssa frowned. "And what's there?"

"Answers,"Torricsaid. His tone made it clear that was all they were getting for now.

But Aarion wasn't listening anymore.

Because from somewhere deeper in the train, a sound was calling to him.

Not a horn.

Not the hum of the engine.

A low, steady pulse.

The same rhythm as the Mark in his hand.The golden gates behind them shivered. Not much, just enough to send a faint ripple through the light , like a drop hitting still water.

Aarion stopped. "Torric… did you see that?"

Torric didn't answer. He was staring past the gates, jaw tight.

The silver-eyed figure on the other side had moved closer. Its body was so thin the light seemed to shine

through it in places, yet every step it took felt heavy, deliberate. The runes on the gate flared brighter each time its clawed foot touched the ground.

And then, from the shadows, more shapes appeared.

Not just one or two , a dozen. Sliding between the trees in unison. No sound except the faint scrape of their claws against stone and the low, almost human breath that carried across the space between them.

Nyssa's hand went to her knife. "They can't get through… right?"

Torric's voice was low. "Not yet."

"Not yet?" Aarion's voice cracked on the last word.

"The gates are holding, but the longer they stand there, the more the Veil thinks."

The lead creature tilted its head, eyes fixed on Aarion's Mark. A slow, awful smile split its glassy face. Then it pressed one long, black hand against the golden barrier.

The light hissed.

Aarion felt it , not in the air, but in his bones , a vibration running through him like the pluck of a string. The Mark burned hotter, and for a second, he could see the lines of power running through the gate.

One of them flickered.

“They’re trying to break it,” Aarion said.

“Yes,”Torricreplied. “Which is why you keep walking.”

They moved quickly, the Emberlight Express looming closer, impossibly large now, its carriages stretching into the shimmer at the far end of the platform. The metal gleamed like molten gold hardened into armor. Each rune along its side shifted as Aarion passed, almost like it was reading him.

He caught glimpses through the windows again:

, A forest in winter, branches heavy with snow, yet warm golden light spilling through the glass.

, A room filled with floating lanterns, drifting like slow fireflies in the dark.

, A spiral staircase that seemed to go up forever, vanishing into clouds.

It was too much to take in at once. Every compartment felt like a doorway to a different world.

The hum beneath the platform deepened, a sound Aarion could feel through his boots. Somewhere up ahead, a chime rang , deep, resonant, and strangely… alive.

Nyssa slowed just enough to glance over her shoulder , and swore.

A crack had formed in the golden light of the gates. Tiny, like a hairline fracture, but with threads of shadow already worming through it. The silver-eyed shapes pressed closer, their outlines sharper now.

One of them lifted its head and let out a sound that wasn't quite a scream and wasn't quite a laugh , a jagged noise that made Aarion's teeth ache.

Mark throbbed in answer, as if daring them to come closer.

They reached the final boarding platform. The brass railing was polished to a mirror sheen, reflecting Aarion's pale face back at him. A sign shifted its letters again:

FINAL CALL

LUMINARIS ACADEMY – DIRECT

Torric motioned to Aarion. "Step on. Let it know you."

Aarion placed a hand on the open doorway. The moment his skin touched the frame, the runes etched into it flared in the same orange-gold as his Mark. The pulse ran up the metal like fire racing along a fuse, and somewhere deep inside the train, something answered.

The floor beneath him gave a subtle lurch , not like the start of motion, but like the train had taken a breath.

Nyssa was right behind him, eyes darting from the floating lanterns to the spiral staircases, her usual sharp tongue held in check by the sheer strangeness of it all.

Torric entered last, and as soon as his foot crossed the threshold, the door slid shut with a sealing chime.

Outside, the first silver-eyed creature lunged for the gate , and the crack in the light burst wide. Shadows spilled through like smoke under pressure, curling toward the platform.

The Emberlight Express reacted instantly.

Every rune along its side flared white-hot, steam burst from its undercarriage in a hiss that sounded almost like a growl, and the golden barrier at the gate solidified again, snapping shut just as the first claw reached for the platform.

The claw hit the barrier and shattered into black glass.

Aarion's chest was still heaving as Toric sheathed his sword.

"They can't touch us now," he said, voice calm again.

Nyssa let out a breath she'd been holding. "Good. Because I'm pretty sure I saw one of them smile."

Aarion didn't answer. His eyes had drifted deeper into the train, toward the pulse that still matched Mark's rhythm. Whatever it was, it was waiting for him.

And for reasons he couldn't explain…

he was already walking toward it.The door clicked shut behind them, and the outside world vanished.

The muffled horn, the claw-scrapes, the golden gates , all of it swallowed by a thick, steady hum that seemed to come from the train's bones.

The air inside was warm, but not stuffy. It carried a faint blend of scents , polished wood, paper and ink, something sweet like fruit left to ripen under the sun, and a faint metallic tang.

Aarion stood just inside the doorway, frozen. The entrance hall didn't look like a normal train compartment. It looked like a great hall from a storybook.

The floor was deep red velvet, soft underfoot. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, their spines gleaming in gold and silver. Ladders moved on their own, sliding silently along rails to reach high shelves. Lanterns floated overhead in lazy circles, their light constantly shifting from warm gold to deep ember-red.

Nyssa walked forward slowly, her voice hushed. “This… this isn’t possible.”

Torric’s tone was matter-of-fact. “On the Emberlight Express, possible doesn’t matter. Only intent does.”

At the far end of the hall, a polished archway opened into the next compartment. Aarion stepped through , and stopped again.

The room beyond was an observatory, its curved glass ceiling revealing a night sky… even though it was morning outside. But this wasn’t the night sky he knew. The constellations here shimmered and shifted as he watched, rearranging themselves into shapes , a flaming bird, a crowned stag, a ring of interlocked circles. Stars flared briefly, then faded, only to appear again in different patterns.

Nyssa tilted her head back. “Those… aren’t our stars.”

“They’re not anyone’s stars,"Toric said. “The sky here shows what it thinks you need to see. Some see maps. Some see warnings. Others… see nothing at all.”

Aarion glanced at him. “And you?”

Torric’s eyes stayed on the glass ceiling. “I see a clock. And it’s always running out.”

They moved on.

The next carriage felt like stepping into another world entirely. Snow drifted gently from nowhere, melting the instant it touched skin. Frost traced delicate patterns along the windows, and in the corner, a fox made entirely of ice lifted its head, its crystal-blue eyes fixed on Aarion. For a moment, he swore it tilted its head in recognition before curling back up again.

“This train…” Aarion began.

“…is alive,"Torric finished for him. “And it recognizes you.”

The hum underfoot deepened. The lanterns in the entrance hall flickered once.Torricglanced toward the front of the train.

“It’s almost time. We need to reach the forward compartments.”

Aarion frowned. “Why?”

“Because that’s where your seat is,"Torric said. “And because of this.”

He led them into a smaller room near the center of the train. It was different , plainer, with benches along the walls and a long, narrow cabinet in the center.Torricstopped in front of it and pressed his palm to the lock.

The cabinet hissed open.

Inside, resting on a cushioned black cloth, was something that was not quite a sword, not quite a wand. The blade was slender, the metal dark but lined with faint silver veins that pulsed faintly, like something alive. The hilt was wrapped in deep crimson leather, and where the guard should have been, a small crystal floated , spinning slowly, shedding a soft light.

The Aetherblade.

Aarion stepped closer, the Mark on his palm warming instantly. The blade's silver veins brightened in response, the crystal's spin quickening.

"It's… reacting," Nyssa murmured.

"It's bound to the Emberlight,"Toric said. "And the Emberlight is bound to you."

Aarion's eyes stayed fixed on the weapon. "So I'm supposed to use it?"

"Not yet,"Toric said sharply. "Until you understand the Mark, the Aetherblade will be as much a danger to you as to your enemy."

Aarion tore his gaze away reluctantly. "Then why show me?"

"Because it knows you're here now,"Toric said simply.

The hum deepened again, turning into a low vibration that ran through the walls and floor. A faint chime sounded , not mechanical, but musical, like a distant chorus.

“Time to depart,"Torric said.

Aarion turned toward the nearest window. The golden shimmer outside the platform was already bending, the edges curling inward. Steam curled from the train’s underside in glowing spirals, scattering embers into the air.

And then, for just a moment, he thought he saw something at the far end of the platform , a tall shadow, gold eyes watching him from the veil between worlds.

Before he could speak, the Emberlight Express gave a single, sharp whistle.

The floor shifted.

The view outside blurred.

And the world began to fall away.

The whistle faded into a deep hum, and the Emberlight Express began to move.

At first, it was barely noticeable , a smooth, gliding motion that didn’t jolt or rattle. But the view outside the windows told a different story.

The golden shimmer of the hidden platform was peeling away, like parchment burning from the edges. Beyond it, the forest blurred, colors smearing together into streaks of green, black, and red.

Nyssa pressed her face to the glass. “We’re… not just moving. We’re leaving.”

Torric’s voice was steady. “We’re between places now. The tracks ahead don’t exist in your world. Or in theirs.”

Aarion leaned closer to the window.

The world outside was warping , twisting into tunnels of light and shadow. Shapes flickered in the distance, huge and shifting, like mountains moving on their own. The hum in the walls rose and fell, almost like breathing.

Then he saw it.

A ripple in the blur outside.

And through it… silver eyes.

“They’re following us,” Aarion said.

Torric didn’t look surprised. “They can’t board from here. The train’s wards,”

The sentence cut off as the window beside them darkened suddenly, like a shadow passing too close. A claw, black and jagged, scraped across the glass.

The sound went through Aarion’s teeth like a blade on stone.

Nyssa stepped back. “I thought you said,”

“They shouldn’t be able to,"Toric growled.

The glass pulsed once, twice , then cracked.

Aarion’s Mark flared before he even thought about it. Heat rushed up his arm, the veins of his palm glowing bright. Instinct made him press it to the window, and the crack blazed with golden-orange light.

The claw outside jerked back, and the shadow shrieked , the sound muffled but still sharp enough to make Nyssa wince. The crack sealed itself in a quick flash of light.

The hum of the train deepened, the lanterns overhead flaring in unison.

Torric’s eyes stayed on Aarion. “It reacted to you. Not the words.”

“What does that mean?” Aarion asked.

“That the Emberlight has decided you’re part of it now,"Toric said. His tone was even, but there was something else in his eyes , not relief. Worry.

Nyssa crossed her arms. “And I’m guessing that’s both good and bad news.”

Torric didn't deny it. "If the train sees you as part of itself… then anything that hunts it will be hunting you too."

They moved forward into the next compartment. Here, the floor was clear crystal, revealing an endless view of glowing tracks suspended over a void. Far below, Aarion could see swirls of light and darkness twisting around each other like a slow whirlpool. Sparks drifted upward in lazy arcs before fading into nothing.

He stopped walking. "What is that?"

"The space between worlds,"Torric said. "We'll be here until the Emberlight reaches its next anchor point. Stay on the path. If you fall,"

",you don't get back up," Nyssa finished grimly.

They crossed in silence, the hum of the train steady but heavier now, almost like it was straining.

At the far end, they entered a dimly lit lounge. Plush seats lined the windows, and a low table in the center held a set of crystal glasses and a decanter filled with a dark amber liquid. The light here was softer, the air warmer, almost inviting , but Aarion couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

Not from the windows.

From the train itself.

Torric finally sat, motioning for them to do the same.

"From here on," he said, "the journey becomes part of your training. The train will test you , sometimes with comfort, sometimes with danger. It doesn't care if you're ready. It only cares if you can keep moving forward."

Aarion glanced at the Aetherblade's compartment door down the hall.

"And if I can't?"

Torric's gaze didn't waver.

"Then it will leave you behind."

The whistle sounded again, sharper this time, and the floor shifted under their feet. Outside, the blur of light began to change, streaks of gold overtaking the shadows.

Somewhere deep in the train, a faint metallic chime echoed, like the ticking of a clock.

Torric looked toward the sound, his jaw tightening.

"We're almost at the first trial."

Aarion sat back, his heart already beating faster.

The Emberlight Express was beautiful… but it wasn't safe.

And he was starting to realize , maybe it never would be.

The lounge carriage was warmer than the others, but Aarion couldn't relax. Even with the soft crackle of a fireplace at the far end, the hum of the Emberlight was sharper now , almost… expectant.

Nyssa was curled in one of the velvet chairs, fidgeting with the knife she always carried.Torricstood at the window, arms crossed, watching the streaking blur of light and shadow outside.

Aarion felt it again.

That pull.

Not toward the Aetherblade this time, but toward something deeper in the train.

"Stay here,"Toric said suddenly. "I'll check the next compartments."

Nyssa raised an eyebrow. "And leave us alone? That's comforting."

"Better than dragging you into something you're not ready for,"Torricsaid without turning. He slid open the next door and stepped through, the faint glow of runes on his sword vanishing with him.

For a moment, Aarion and Nyssa were alone.

And then the lights changed.

The lanterns in the lounge dimmed, and the hum underfoot slowed, deepened , like the train was sinking into a dream. A faint shimmer appeared across the far wall, the velvet curtains rippling without wind.

Nyssa stood instantly, knife ready. “Tell me you see that.”

“I see it,” Aarion whispered.

The shimmer deepened into an image , faint, blurred at first, then sharp.

Not a reflection.

A vision.

A woman with flowing silver hair stood on a battlefield under a storm-black sky, lightning crackling along the blade in her hands.

Her armor was scorched, her cheek bloodied, but her eyes… her eyes blazed with unshakable defiance.

A name rose in Aarion’s mind before he could stop it.

Lyraen Solmist.

The image shifted , a tall figure in shadowed robes, a staff in one hand, the other clutching a dagger dripping black smoke. His face was hidden, but when he looked up, Aarion saw eyes like pools of night.

Kaelith Draven.

Nyssa stepped back, her voice low. “What is this?”

Before Aarion could answer, the vision flared again , a cascade of faces, each one locking eyes with him for a heartbeat before vanishing into the shimmer:

Serenya Duskvale, an elven healer kneeling beside a wounded soldier, her hands glowing with silver-green light.

Tharos Ironfang, a dwarf swinging an axe wreathed in sparks.

Valira Frostglen, her breath freezing the air as she stood atop a glacier.

Queen Elendra Vaeloria, her crown burning with faint, hidden runes.

Each image came with a feeling , a flash of loyalty, grief, or danger.

Then the visions darkened.

Flames roared.

And a towering figure emerged, clad in armor black as obsidian, his face hidden behind a mask of twisted steel. In his hand, a sword that dripped molten fire.

Malgorath the Eternal.

His voice wasn't heard so much as felt, pressing into Aarion's skull:

Find me, or I will find you.

The vision shattered.

Aarion staggered back, gripping the arm of a chair. Nyssa caught his elbow. "What the hell was that?"

Before he could answer,Toric returned, his eyes scanning the room.

"You saw something."

Aarion nodded slowly. "People. Places. Faces. And… him."

Torric's jaw tightened. "The Emberlight is showing you the players in the war. Allies. Enemies. Some you'll meet soon. Others…" He looked toward the windows, where streaks of shadow still clawed at the edges of the blur. "Others will find you first."

The whistle blew again, louder this time. The train shuddered.

Torric's hand went to his sword.

"Brace yourselves. We've just crossed into a Rift Zone."

"What?" Nyssa demanded.

But beforeTorriccould answer, the windows on the left side of the lounge blackened , and something slammed into the side of the carriage.

The floor tilted. The lights flickered. Outside, Aarion caught a flash of golden scales, a massive wing, and eyes like molten sun.

It wasn't the shadow creatures.

It was something far older.

The Emberlight screamed , a sound of steel and magic under strain , and lurched forward, faster than before. The thing outside gave a frustrated roar, and a massive claw raked along the length of the carriage, leaving glowing gashes in the metal.

The hum beneath Aarion's feet became a pounding heartbeat. His Mark burned hot, and for a moment, he felt the train's fear.

And he realized this journey was going to be far more dangerous thanTorrichad told them.

The thing outside didn't just scrape the carriage , it clung to it.

The entire lounge tilted again as its weight dragged against the Emberlight's momentum. Aarion grabbed the nearest armrest to keep his balance, Nyssa planting herself against the wall with a sharp curse.

Through the blackened glass, he saw movement , a ripple of molten gold and deep crimson, like the surface of lava shifting under pressure. A scaled wing flashed past the window, large enough to block what little light filtered through the Rift Zone's shifting skies.

The train's hum became a throbbing pulse. Somewhere deep in its structure, a sound like distant bells rang in uneven intervals.

"Rift predator,"Toric said, voice low.

His hand rested on his sword but didn't draw it , as though he knew steel alone wouldn't be enough.

Nyssa's eyes were wide. "You're telling me there are things in here that can hunt a train?"

"Some can swallow it whole,"Torric replied grimly. "Morvash is not the largest of them… but it's the hungriest."

Aarion's Mark flared at the name. His palm burned, and for a second, he saw an image , a dragon's head emerging from a volcano, eyes like molten coins, jaws spilling rivers of fire.

The heat vanished as quickly as it came, leaving his skin tingling.

The train lurched, metal groaning as Morvash struck again, this time near the engine.

Toric moved fast. "Stay here. Don't leave the lounge unless I tell you."

He pushed through the next door, his boots hitting the crystal-floored observation car. Aarion ignored the warning and followed Nyssa right behind him.

The Rift Zone was chaos beyond the glass. The endless whirl of light and shadow outside the tracks bent and stretched, forming impossible shapes , floating spires that twisted into spirals, rivers of molten light that ran upward into nowhere. Between them, flashes of things , serpentine shapes, clawed limbs, wings like torn sails , watching the train glide past.

Up ahead, through the glass walls, Aarion saw the engine car , and just beyond it, Morvash.

The Flame Wyrm's body coiled through the void, scales shedding sparks that drifted lazily only to explode in sudden bursts of heat. Its jaws opened, and for a moment Aarion thought it would spit fire.

Instead, it roared.

The sound hit the train like a wall. The crystal floor cracked under Aarion's boots.

Torric turned sharply, his eyes on Aarion. "The Aetherblade. Now."

They reached the weapons cabinet from before. Torric's palm lit the runes, unlocking it with a hiss. The Aetherblade floated up slightly from its cushion, the

crystal at its guard spinning faster as Aarion stepped closer.

“It will try to control you,"Toric warned. “Do not let it lead. You command it, or it will burn through you.”

Aarion gripped the hilt.

The moment he did, the Mark on his palm blazed, and the silver veins along the blade erupted in orange light. His vision sharpened , the lounge walls seemed thinner, the Rift Zone’s chaotic shapes clearer.

And somewhere, deep in the hum of the train, he heard a voice.

Not words, just a low, steady rhythm, syncing perfectly with his heartbeat.

Another impact shook the Emberlight, harder than before.

The Aetherblade pulsed, and instinctively, Aarion swung it toward the nearest window. He didn’t hit the glass , instead, a wave of golden flame burst outward from the blade, running along the train’s outer wards.

Outside, Morvash recoiled, letting go of the carriage.

For a brief moment, the train surged forward, speed doubling. The void twisted into streaks of gold and red, the hum turning into a deep, resonant note.

But Morvash wasn't gone.

The Rift Zone warped ahead of them, the tracks bending sharply around a floating mass of black rock. Morvash's massive shape rose from behind it, jaws opening wide.

Aarion felt the heat building before it came , a torrent of flame, bright as a collapsing star, racing toward the train.

The Aetherblade's crystal flared.

The voice in the hum grew louder.

Now.

Aarion raised the weapon, the Mark burning like molten metal under his skin. The blade's light surged into a dome of ember-gold fire, wrapping the train just as the dragon's breath hit.

The impact blinded him.

When his vision cleared, the Emberlight was still moving , faster than before. Morvash was a dwindling shape in the Rift Zone's chaos, roaring in frustration. The wards along the train's sides glowed faintly, steaming from the heat they'd just endured.

Aarion let the Aetherblade lower, the light in its veins fading. His legs shook, and Toric caught him by the shoulder.

“Not bad,"Toric said quietly. “But that was the easy part.”

Nyssa gave him a look. “Easy?”

Torric’s gaze drifted toward the front of the train. “The Rift doesn’t let you leave without a price.”

As if on cue, the lounge lanterns dimmed again , not in vision this time, but physically. The hum faltered, the floor tilting slightly under their feet.

In the glass beside them, reflections began to appear. Not theirs.

Faces.

A tall, armored man with burning eyes , Zorath Bloodpyre , standing in a city on fire.

A hooded figure with crimson tattoos , Seraxis Vornshade , holding a bloodied dagger.

A woman in black lace and silver chains , Azmara Nightthorn , smiling faintly as her eyes flashed purple.

Each face lingered for a breath, then vanished.

The last reflection was not human.

A stag crowned with silver antlers, eyes like pale moons , Luthien the Moon Stag , stepping through a forest of

white trees. Its gaze locked on Aarion, and for a moment, the Rift Zone fell away. He stood in that forest, breathing cold air, hearing the slow rhythm of hooves on frost.

Then the hum returned. The stag was gone.

Nyssa shivered. “I don’t like this place.”

“Good,”Torricsaid. “That means you’re paying attention.”

Minutes later, the streaks outside began to thin. The light stabilized, and the hum underfoot smoothed into a steady rhythm. The Emberlight was leaving the Rift.

Up ahead, shapes began to form , spires of silver and white stone, bridges of glass spanning wide canals, towers crowned with floating crystals. The air outside shimmered with faint runes drifting upward like sparks.

Torric nodded toward it. “Luminaris.”

Aarion stared, unable to look away.

He didn’t know what waited for him there.

But after the Rift… he knew it wouldn’t be rest.

The Emberlight Express slowed, its hum softening into a low, steady purr. The glass of the observation deck cleared completely, revealing the city ahead.

Luminaris didn’t look real.

It rose out of the clouds like a dream given shape , white stone towers with silver veins running through them, bridges of crystal arching between their peaks. Floating lanterns drifted lazily in the air above, glowing with colors that shifted like sunrise. Waterfalls of liquid light cascaded from the heights into rivers that ran in impossible loops.

Even Nyssa was silent, her usual smirk replaced by something like awe.

Torric stood straighter, his gaze fixed ahead. “Stay close to me. Luminaris sees everything. And it judges quickly.”

As they drew nearer, Aarion noticed something strange.

The great gates of the city , two massive arcs of pure silver , stood wide open, but beyond them was not the city’s streets. Instead, a vast, shimmering wall of light blocked the way, rippling like heat above a fire.

The train slowed to a complete stop just before the gates.

The hum died.

“Why aren’t we moving?” Nyssa asked.

“Because we can't,"Torric said. “Not until you pass.”

The lounge door slid open, and for the first time since boarding, another figure entered.

She was tall, cloaked in deep blue, her face shadowed by a hood. In her hands was a staff of pale crystal, its tip crowned with a slow-turning sphere of silver light.

Her voice was smooth, melodic, but it carried an edge. “Passengers Aarion Veylan and Nyssa Moonveil. You will step forward.”

Nyssa stiffened. “Why only us?”

“Because you carry no oath to Luminaris,” the woman replied. “The gates must know you before they let you through.”

Aarion felt his Mark heat faintly. He glanced at Torric, but the warrior only gave a short nod.

They stepped off the train onto the silver platform. The air was warmer here, scented faintly with something like rain on stone.

The woman in blue raised her staff, and the wall of light shifted. It expanded outward, curling into a perfect sphere around Aarion and Nyssa. The city vanished; the train vanished; even the platform was gone.

They stood in a void of pale gold light.

A voice spoke , not from the woman, but from everywhere. Deep, resonant, ancient.

“Name yourselves.”

Aarion swallowed. “Aarion Veylan.”

“Nyssa Moonveil,” Nyssa said quickly.

The voice echoed again.

“Prove you are worthy to walk the streets of Luminaris.”

The gold light dimmed. Shapes began to form around them , tall stone pillars, cracked and broken, in a wasteland under a storming sky. In the distance, black clouds churned, and shadowed forms moved just beyond the horizon.

Nyssa turned in a slow circle. “This is… not real. Right?”

Aarion’s Mark flared. “It feels real enough.”

From the shadows ahead, three figures emerged.

Not people , statues, or at least they looked like it. Tall warriors of stone, each holding a weapon: a sword, a spear, and a bow. Their eyes glowed faint silver.

The voice returned.

“You will face your reflection.”

The first statue moved , stepping forward with a slow, deliberate gait, sword raised. The second followed, the spear glinting in the pale light. The archer knocked an arrow and drew, the bowstring creaking.

Nyssa gritted her teeth. “You take two, I take one?”

“Let’s just survive first,” Aarion said.

The sword-wielder lunged. Aarion dodged, the Mark on his palm burning brighter, almost guiding his movements. He swung his arm in an instinctive arc , and a burst of ember-gold light shot outward, striking the statue’s chest.

It staggered, cracks spidering through its stone armor.

Nyssa was already moving, flipping low under the spear-wielder’s thrust and slashing with her dagger. Sparks flew where metal met stone. She landed behind it, kicked its knee joint hard, and it fell with a shattering crunch.

The archer released its arrow , straight at Aarion’s chest.

Mark flared, and without thinking, he raised his hand. A shield of shimmering fire erupted in front of him, the arrow disintegrating on contact.

The statues crumbled one by one under their attacks, until only dust and fragments remained. The storm above began to fade, the sky turning pale again.

The voice spoke once more.

“The gates open for those who fight together.”

The wasteland dissolved, the gold light returning. Aarion and Nyssa stood once again before the silver gates of Luminaris. The wall of light shimmered, then parted, revealing the city’s streets beyond.

Torric was waiting at the platform edge. He gave a small, approving nod. “Not bad for your first test.”

Aarion glanced at the city ahead, heart still pounding. “That was just the first?”

Torric’s expression darkened slightly. “In Luminaris, every day is a test.”

The silver gates stood tall above them, open now, their surface etched with countless runes that shimmered faintly as Aarion and Nyssa stepped through.

The moment Aarion crossed the threshold, the Mark on his palm flared hotter than ever before. For a split second, the streets ahead vanished from his sight , replaced by an endless web of golden threads stretching in all directions, each connecting towers, bridges, even

the people walking past. The city was alive in ways he could barely comprehend.

When his vision cleared, Luminaris unfolded before him in breathtaking clarity.

Bridges of glass spanned over canals flowing with water that glittered like liquid silver. Crystals floated high above, casting shifting patterns of light across the white-stone streets. Streetlamps were shaped like flowering vines, their blossoms glowing softly.

Citizens moved with quiet purpose , elves in embroidered robes, dwarves carrying rune-inscribed crates, scholars in layered cloaks reading while walking. Everywhere, faint magic lingered in the air, as if the city itself breathed power.

Nyssa whistled low. “If I tried to pickpocket here, I’d probably get turned into a toad before I even touched a coin.”

“Or worse,"Toric replied without looking at her.

They passed under a sweeping arch that opened into a vast plaza. In its center was a fountain unlike any Aarion had seen , a towering spire of crystal wrapped in a helix of water, the whole structure turning slowly in mid-air. At its base, inscriptions glowed faint blue.

It was here that they met the first figure.

She stood at the edge of the fountain, armor polished to a mirror shine, her long braid of golden hair resting over one shoulder. Lightning flickered faintly along the edges of her gauntlets, as if her body could barely contain it.

Her eyes locked on Aarion instantly.

“You’re the one from the Emberlight,” she said , not a question.

“Lyraen Solmist,"Torric introduced her. “Princess of the Stormbound Court. Also your classmate.”

Nyssa muttered, “Great, a royal. This will be fun.”

Lyraen’s gaze was intense, but not hostile. “If you’re who they say you are, I hope you’re ready. Luminaris doesn’t wait for the slow to catch up.”

Before Aarion could answer, another voice spoke , low, smooth, and cold.

“I wouldn’t get too attached, Princess. Prophecies are as fragile as glass.”

A man stepped from the shadow of the arch. His robes were deep violet, the edges trailing faint wisps of darkness. His hair was black as night, his eyes like pools of ink that reflected no light.

Kaelith Draven.

Aarion felt a strange pull toward him, but it was nothing like the Emberlight's hum , this was colder, sharper, dangerous.

Kaelith offered a faint, humorless smile. "We'll see if the Mark makes you strong… or makes you break."

Torric cut in sharply. "Enough. The Headmaster is waiting."

They crossed the plaza, ascending marble steps that led to the largest building Aarion had ever seen , a hall with towers that seemed to pierce the clouds, each crowned with a different glowing sigil.

Inside, the air was cooler, scented faintly of parchment and incense. Rows of banners hung from the ceiling, each bearing the crest of a different kingdom or order.

At the far end, behind a desk carved from a single block of obsidian, sat a man in robes of silver and white. His hair was pure white as well, but his eyes were the blue of a clear winter sky.

Archmage Thalen Myrris.

The Archmage rose, his staff clicking once against the floor. The sound echoed unnaturally, carrying far longer than it should have.

“So… the Emberlight has brought you.” His gaze fell to Aarion’s palm. The Mark flared on its own, glowing through the leather of his glove.

Thalen’s eyes narrowed slightly. “It answers me. That’s… unexpected.”

Aarion swallowed. “Do you know what it means?”

Thalen’s expression was unreadable. “I know it means the clock has begun to tick faster.”

Before Aarion could speak again, a deep bell tolled somewhere high in the towers. The Archmage’s gaze turned toward the sound.

“Your arrival was timely. The First Convergence begins at dawn. And I assure you…” He stepped closer, his voice lowering. “…it will not wait for you to settle in.”

The Mark pulsed in agreement , or warning.

Aarion wasn’t sure which.

Ending line:

The Emberlight had delivered him to Luminaris, but as the Archmage’s words sank in, Aarion realized the real trials were only just beginning.

Luminaris was quieter at night, but it was never silent.

The bridges still glowed faintly underfoot, the lantern-flowers still swayed with unseen breezes. From the high balconies of the academy, Aarion could see the whole city laid out in silver light, the waterfalls of energy flowing like veins in a living creature.

Nyssa was leaning against the railing beside him, tossing a small coin in the air. “So… tomorrow is the First Convergence. Any idea what that actually means?”

“Not really,” Aarion admitted. “But I’m starting to think I should.”

Torric joined them, his steps silent despite the weight of his armor. “You’ll learn soon enough. The Convergence is part trial, part… unveiling. No one comes out the same.”

Nyssa smirked. “Comforting.”

Torric’s gaze swept the skyline, lingering on the glowing wards above the city. “Get some rest. You’ll need it.”

Aarion’s room was high in one of the western towers. From his bed, he could see the floating crystals beyond the window, drifting slowly through the night sky like stars untethered from the heavens.

Sleep came quickly , but it was not peaceful.

The Dream

He stood on a bridge of glass over an ocean of shadow.

From the darkness below, faces rose , Lyraen, lightning crackling in her hands; Kaelith, eyes like bottomless void; Serenya Duskvale, tears streaking her cheeks as her glowing hands pressed against a wound on someone unseen.

Then the faces changed , Zorath Bloodpyre roaring amidst burning towers, Azmara Nightthorn's smile curdling into something sharp, Malgorath the Eternal stepping through fire with a blade that seemed to split the sky.

Above them all, a massive silhouette , wings like storm clouds, eyes like dying suns , watched him.

The voice that came was the same he'd heard in the Rift Zone.

The Emberlight chose you. I will test you.

Aarion woke up with a start.

The Mark on his palm was glowing , not faintly, but in sharp, pulsing light that threw shadows on the walls.

A bell tolled once in the distance.

Then twice.

And then a third time , louder, deeper, so powerful that the crystals outside his window shuddered in mid-air.

He heard shouting from below.

Pulling on his boots, Aarion ran to the balcony.

Above the city, the wards were shaking , the delicate web of golden runes flickering, lines breaking apart. Through the cracks, something pressed in , black mist with shapes moving inside it, tall and hunched, their eyes glowing faint amber.

The mist rolled downward, pressing toward the streets. The wards strained but didn't close.

Torric appeared in the courtyard below, sword drawn, shouting orders in a language Aarion didn't recognize. Lyraen was already there, lightning dancing along her armor, and Kaelith emerged from the shadows, his staff gleaming with violet runes.

Nyssa appeared at Aarion's door, knives already in her hands. "Guess we're skipping breakfast."

Before Aarion could reply, the ground trembled.

The Mark on his palm flared painfully, and he felt it , the hum of the Emberlight Express, echoing inside his mind.

It wasn't here.

But somehow… it was calling him.

A crack split the sky above Luminaris, and from it, a single, jagged claw emerged.

Ending line:

Aarion didn't know whether the Emberlight was warning him… or summoning him back into danger.

Aarion didn't move at first.

The claw above Luminaris hung frozen in the rift, its jagged talons curling and uncurling like it was testing the air. Lightning rippled faintly across its black surface, revealing glimpses of something massive behind it , a shape too large to fit through the crack in the sky.

The Mark on his palm throbbed harder, pulsing in perfect rhythm with the Emberlight's hum in his head.

"Nyssa…" Aarion's voice was low, almost swallowed by the wind picking up outside. "Do you hear it?"

"Hear what?" she asked, eyes locked on the claw.

"That sound. Like the train's heartbeat."

A second claw gripped the edge of the rift, tearing it wider.

Below, the wards above the city strained, their glowing runes flickering as if the magic holding them together was unraveling thread by thread.

From the courtyard, Torric's voice cut through the night , sharp, commanding, in a language Aarion didn't recognize. The sound of it seemed to bolster the city's defenses for a moment; the wards steadied, the ripples in the barrier smoothing out.

Then came the roar.

It wasn't just sound , it was pressure, a wave of force that rattled windows and made the ground vibrate. Nyssa stumbled back, clutching her ears. Aarion felt it deep in his bones.

Shapes moved inside the widening rift , not one creature, but many. Tall, hunched silhouettes with eyes like burning embers. The mist around them writhed like living smoke, spilling through the tears in the sky and dripping toward the streets below.

Aarion's Mark blazed, the light bright enough to bathe the balcony in ember-gold. The hum in his skull grew louder, clearer.

Come back.

It wasn't a voice, not exactly, but it was communication.

The Emberlight Express was calling him.

Nyssa grabbed his arm. “Aarion, we’re not going back into that thing, are we?!”

He didn’t answer , because he didn’t know.

Down below, Lyraen had joined Torric, arcs of lightning snapping from her hands to the encroaching mist. Kaelith stood beside her, his staff casting waves of violet light that made the shadow-shapes flinch and stagger. The three of them moved like parts of the same defense, holding the line as more mist poured in.

But the rift above was still widening.

A single ember drifted down from the sky, glowing faintly orange as it fell past Aarion’s balcony. He reached out without thinking , and the moment his fingers touched it, heat surged up his arm.

In his mind, the Emberlight’s image flared into focus: the crimson-and-gold train racing along impossible tracks, sparks flying, its compartments glowing from within. The Aetherblade floated in one of them, its crystal spinning rapidly.

And in that vision, something else was on the train.

A shadow, walking from car to car, leaving frost and ash in its wake.

The connection snapped.

Aarion stumbled back, breathing hard.

Nyssa's eyes widened. "What did you just see?"

"Not here," he said quickly, glancing toward the courtyard. "We need to get down there. Now."

The two raced down the tower's spiral staircase, the sound of battle growing louder with each step , crackling lightning, ringing steel, the hiss of magic striking something unnatural.

They burst into the courtyard just as a section of the wards overhead shattered like glass. A wave of cold mist poured in through the gap, flooding toward them.

Torric turned, his voice like thunder. "Aarion! Mark , use it!"

"I don't know how!" Aarion shouted back, but the truth was, he did. The hum in his head was guiding him. His body moved before his mind could catch up , hand raised, the Mark flaring, heat building until the air around his palm shimmered.

A burst of ember-gold energy erupted outward, cutting through the mist and forcing the shadow shapes to recoil. The roar from above deepened, and the claw withdrew slightly, as if the force had stung it.

For a heartbeat, everything went still.

Then the rift in the sky tore wider in one violent pull.

Through it, Aarion saw an eye , massive, molten gold, unblinking , fix on him.

And then came a voice, this time clear and terrible:

You carry the Emberlight's flame. I will take it.

The ground shook so violently that cracks split the courtyard stones. The mist surged again, faster, thicker.

Torric drew his sword. Lyraen's armor flared with lightning. Kaelith stepped forward, violet fire wreathing his staff.

Somewhere deep inside his mind, Aarion felt the train's hum become a roar. The Emberlight was moving , and it was coming toward him.

But whether it was coming to save him… or to drag him somewhere worse…

he couldn't tell.

– CHAPTER THREE–

The Whispering Halls

The Emberlight Express began to slow, its deep, resonant hum sinking into a low purr that reverberated through the floorboards. Outside the viewing windows, the last remnants of the Rift's mist thinned into wisps, revealing a sight so vast and impossible that Aarion forgot to breathe. Floating above an endless expanse of rolling white clouds stood the gates of Luminaris Academy, colossal arches of crystalline stone so tall they seemed to pierce the sky itself. The surface of the arches shifted in color with every second, silver melting into violet, violet blending into deep cerulean, the change smooth and hypnotic as if the stone itself were alive. Thin bands of glowing runes circled lazily between the arches, rotating in perfect silence, each symbol pulsing faintly as though keeping time with the train's heartbeat.

Nyssa leaned forward, palms against the glass, her reflection merging with the drifting clouds. "I've broken into palaces, temples… even a skyship once," she murmured. "But this? This is another level." The train glided toward a platform that seemed to be carved from

solid sunlight, its surface radiant yet not blinding, each step echoing like glass underfoot. Beyond the platform's edge, the cloudsea rolled in slow, hypnotic waves, pierced only by distant mountain peaks jutting like ancient guardians through the mist.

All along the perimeter, the academy's guardians prowled. They were not mere animals nor constructs, but creatures of pure enchantment. A stag wrought from moonlight itself lowered its antlers toward a group of passing students before dissolving into silver mist. A serpent woven from threads of wind coiled lazily around a crystal pillar, its scales scattering tiny rainbows with every slow movement. Overhead, great feathered beasts glided on invisible currents, their amber eyes sharp with intelligence as they followed every motion below.

The armor-clad stranger who had guided them from the forest stood at the Emberlight's open door, the visor of his helm reflecting the crimson-gold glow of the engine. He stepped down first, boots making no sound on the radiant platform, and waited for them to follow. "This is where our paths part," he said, voice low and measured. Aarion stepped toward him, confusion clouding his expression. "You brought us all this way. Why leave now?" The stranger tilted his head slightly, as though considering how much to reveal, before speaking again. "Because you must walk the next steps alone. And remember this," his tone deepened to a weight that

settled in Aarion's bones,"do not trust the walls. They speak to those who listen."

Nyssa raised an eyebrow. "That's supposed to help?" But before Aarion could speak, the stranger took a single step backward and vanished. Not into shadow, not into mist,just gone, as if he had never been there at all. Aarion and Nyssa exchanged a glance that said neither of them knew what to make of it. "Guess we're on our own now," Nyssa muttered. Together they crossed the platform toward the towering gates.

The crystalline arches loomed above them, their sheer scale enough to make the Emberlight look like a child's toy in comparison. Inlaid within the stone were living illusions,shifting images of battles fought beneath strange skies, coronations in distant lands, and cosmic landscapes so alien Aarion could not begin to guess their meaning. As they passed beneath the massive archway, a brief pressure touched Aarion's mind, as if unseen hands were riffling quickly through the pages of a book. It was gone before he could react, replaced by the faint hum of magic so deep it felt like the entire place had a pulse.

Beyond the gates, the academy grounds stretched out across vast floating terraces, each one linked by narrow bridges of shimmering light. The towers ahead pierced the drifting clouds, their spires topped with rotating sigils that left faint trails of light in the air. Magic was everywhere,visible, tangible. Books carried themselves

between buildings, ropes tied themselves into perfect knots to form ladders, fountains flowed upward into the sky before bursting into shapes of birds and dragons that dissolved into mist. Students crossed bridges in small groups, their robes fluttering in the high-altitude wind, some in deep conversation, others trailed by familiars made of flame, shadow, or water.

Nyssa's smirk softened into something close to awe. "Okay… I might actually like it here." Aarion wasn't so sure. The beauty was undeniable, but beneath it all, he felt something else,a weight, a watchfulness, as though the academy itself were aware of him, quietly measuring, quietly judging. He adjusted his grip on the strap of his bag, his gaze lingering on the shimmering pathways ahead. Somewhere within these walls,these walls that, according to the stranger, could speak,waited for answers. Or perhaps, more questions. Either way, there was no turning back now.

Aarion stepped off the bridge of shimmering light and onto the first floating terrace, the change in air hitting him instantly. It was cooler here, carrying a faint scent of parchment, rain, and something he couldn't place,like the crackle in the air before lightning strikes. The surface beneath his boots was smooth but warm, like polished stone that had soaked in sunlight all day. Nyssa's eyes darted everywhere at once, not in awe but in the way a thief catalogues doors, shadows, and escape routes.

Ahead, an archway of gold-veined marble marked the entrance to the main courtyard. Students streamed through it, some walking in groups, others levitating casually a few inches above the ground, a few more riding what appeared to be invisible mounts that only showed as faint ripples in the air. Aarion caught himself slowing down, drawn to every strange sight,the way the banners lining the arch shifted their emblems whenever a new group passed, the faint shimmer above certain students' heads like halos of energy, the way the paving stones rearranged themselves to clear a path for the busiest corridors.

As they crossed into the courtyard, the scale of Luminaris hit him. Four massive towers ringed the open space, their walls inscribed with runes that pulsed in complex sequences. Floating balconies drifted between them without visible support, each carrying students or crates of supplies. The ground-level gardens were alive with color: flowers that opened when you looked at them, vines that leaned toward conversations, and fruit trees whose branches bowed invitingly as people passed.

One of the moonlight stags emerged from between the towers, antlers brushing faintly against the underside of a balcony as it moved. Students stepped aside instinctively, some bowing slightly, and Aarion realized this was not just a guardian but something revered. The stag's eyes locked on him briefly, and for a moment the courtyard's sounds dimmed. He could almost hear a word,no, not a

word, a tone, low and resonant, in the base of his mind,before the creature turned away and vanished into a shimmer of silver.

Nyssa noticed his distracted look. “Friend of yours?”

“I… don’t know,” Aarion replied. “But I think it knew me.”

They followed the stream of new arrivals toward the main hall, a colossal building whose facade shimmered like heat haze. As they stepped inside, the temperature shifted again,not warmer or colder, but charged, like the air was saturated with magic. The walls were lined with tall windows of stained glass depicting scenes that moved as though alive: duels between mages, councils of kings and queens, a phoenix flying in endless circles of fire and ash. The floor was a single sheet of dark stone polished so perfectly that the ceiling’s glowing chandeliers reflected like stars in a night sky.

A group of robed figures passed them, their faces hidden, each carrying a staff topped with a different crystal. As they moved, whispers followed them,not from the crowd, but from the very walls, faint enough that Aarion thought at first he imagined it. The sound curled around him like a breeze, unintelligible but urgent, and for a heartbeat his Mark pulsed faintly beneath his glove.

Nyssa glanced sideways at him. “You heard that too, didn’t you?”

He hesitated before answering. “Yeah. I think the walls are already talking.”

Aarion slowed his pace as the whispers grew faintly louder, almost threading themselves between the footsteps of the crowd. He strained to catch words, but they dissolved into unintelligible murmurs, shifting from one ear to the other as if the sound was circling him. Every so often, a syllable would sharpen,sharp enough to feel rather than hear,before vanishing again. He caught Nyssa watching him from the corner of her eye. She was walking casually, but her fingers twitched toward the dagger she kept hidden under her jacket.

The line of new arrivals curved toward a wide, circular chamber whose domed ceiling shimmered with a constantly shifting mural of the night sky. Stars rearranged themselves in slow spirals, forming constellations Aarion didn’t recognize. Some of the stars pulsed faintly, and he had the unsettling impression that they were aware of him in return.

In the center of the chamber stood a massive hourglass, twice the height of a man. Instead of sand, it held a slow cascade of glowing motes, each drifting downward like tiny embers. Every time the upper chamber emptied completely, the motes below swirled upward again,

defying gravity. Students passed it with barely a glance, as though it had always been there, but Aarion couldn't take his eyes off it. For an instant, one of the motes seemed to pause mid-descent and burn brighter, reflecting perfectly in his Mark.

A tall woman in emerald-green robes glided past, her robes whispering over the stone floor. The crowd seemed to part instinctively for her, even without her asking. She didn't look directly at Aarion, but as she passed, her lips moved in a single, silent word, and the Mark on his palm pulsed once in answer.

The crowd moved again, guiding him toward another set of towering doors carved from dark wood veined with veins of silver that pulsed faintly, like the beat of a heart. The moment the doors opened, a wash of sound hit them,laughter, the rustle of parchment, the hum of spells being cast.

Beyond lay the Grand Atrium, a vast hall lined with archways leading into other wings of the academy. Students of every age and race filled the space,elves with hair like woven silver, dwarves wearing breastplates inscribed with faintly glowing runes, humans in robes that shimmered with embedded wards. Hovering above them all were luminous globes of light that drifted lazily from group to group, sometimes dipping low as if listening to conversations.

Aarion stepped aside to let a trio of younger students pass, each balancing a stack of floating books. One of the books turned in mid-air and opened toward him, its pages flipping rapidly before snapping shut and drifting after its owner. Nyssa raised a brow. “Even the books are nosy here.”

In the far corner, a massive staircase spiraled upward, its steps shifting subtly as people climbed, altering size and height to match the stride of each person. The railings were carved with flowing runes that glowed faintly under the touch of passing hands. Along the walls, portraits of past academy masters moved in their frames, some holding quiet conversations with each other, others watching the students with eyes that followed too closely.

Aarion’s gaze kept being pulled upward to the ceiling. Above the atrium’s chandeliers was no painted dome, but an open illusion of the sky outside,except here, the clouds seemed closer, more luminous, and he could see strange winged shapes gliding far above.

The whispers returned then, louder than before, a layered chorus that seemed to bleed from the walls themselves. This time he caught a word,two syllables that wrapped around his thoughts before fading into the general hum of the room. He didn’t understand it, but it left behind a faint echo in the Mark, a reminder that the stranger’s warning had been more than just cryptic words.

Nyssa brushed past him, tilting her head toward a side corridor. “Come on. I think the new arrivals are heading that way.” Aarion gave the atrium one last glance before following her, the feeling of unseen eyes lingering long after they left the crowd behind.

The robed attendant moved without taking steps, gliding as if the floor carried them. Their robe was deep indigo, threaded with tiny motes of gold that shifted like a night sky when they turned. Every time they paused at a group, a scroll would float from the nearest stand and unfurl on its own, names glowing briefly before fading.

When they reached Aarion and Nyssa, the scroll that came to them was different , thicker parchment, edges faintly singed, the letters etched in a dark ember-red glow. The attendant’s gaze flicked up at Aarion, lingering for a heartbeat too long, before they marked something on the page with a quill that bled silver ink.

“Proceed to the Grand Atrium,” the attendant said, voice neither male nor female, but smooth and steady like running water. “Your arrival is… noted.” The last word had weight to it, as if it carried an unspoken second meaning.

They moved on, but Aarion’s Mark gave a single, sharp pulse , almost like an alarm , before quieting again.

The terrace narrowed into a colonnade of tall pillars, each wrapped in spirals of shimmering script that moved

like living handwriting. Some of the letters broke free from the surface, fluttering like golden insects before settling back into place. Aarion reached out without thinking, and one of the floating letters brushed against his fingertip. For an instant, his vision fractured , he saw a corridor of endless doors, each marked with a different sigil, and from somewhere deep within came the same whispering voices.

Nyssa grabbed his wrist, pulling him forward. “Let’s keep moving before the walls actually start a conversation with you.”

The colonnade opened into a wide courtyard with a pool at its center, the water dark and mirror-like. Students crossed bridges of light that floated just above the water’s surface. Every so often, something stirred beneath , glimmers of scales, flashes of pale eyes. A dwarf in rune-etched armor leaned on the railing and dropped a copper coin into the pool; the water swallowed it without a ripple.

From the far end of the courtyard, a low chime rang , deep and resonant, vibrating in the chest. The students began to move toward the Grand Atrium’s open doors, and the crowd carried Aarion and Nyssa with it.

The Grand Atrium was larger than any hall Aarion had seen, so vast it could have held the Emberlight Express in its entirety. The floor was polished blackstone,

reflecting the glow of chandeliers suspended from invisible chains. Above them, the ceiling was a living sky , clouds drifting lazily, pierced by occasional streaks of shooting stars that vanished before reaching the walls. Those walls were lined with towering stained glass windows, each depicting a different moment of history, the figures moving subtly as though aware of being watched.

Students of every kind filled the space , elves with silver hair braided into complex patterns, dwarves carrying satchels that looked heavier than they could possibly lift, humans in robes laced with glowing runes. Hovering above them were pale, luminous orbs that drifted from group to group, occasionally dipping low to hover near a student’s face before drifting away again.

Aarion felt it then , the whispers, threading between conversations, curling along the edges of his hearing. Louder now, more insistent. And just for a moment, he thought he caught his name in them. The Mark under his glove grew warm.

A figure in emerald-green robes passed by, not looking directly at him yet somehow making it clear she had seen him. Her lips moved in a single word he couldn’t hear, but Mark throbbed once in answer. Before he could speak, she was gone, vanishing into a cluster of students as though she had never been there.

Nyssa nudged him with her elbow. “You look like you’ve just been hexed.”

“Maybe I have,” Aarion muttered, scanning the crowd for the green-robed figure, but she had already disappeared.

They were funneled toward a staircase spiraling upward along the far wall. Its steps adjusted in size and height for each person, runes along the railing glowing briefly as hands brushed over them. The air grew cooler as they climbed, and the whispers thinned but never quite went away. At the top was a long corridor lined with portraits of past masters, each frame carved from a different kind of wood and inlaid with precious metals. The painted eyes followed them as they passed , some merely observing, others narrowing, and one or two smiling faintly in ways that didn’t feel entirely friendly.

By the time they reached the final set of doors, Aarion had the strange feeling that the academy had already taken his measure , and that it had not yet decided what to do with him.

The tall silver-veined doors swung open without anyone touching them, revealing a corridor so wide that three horse-drawn carriages could have ridden side by side. The walls weren’t made of stone but of interwoven strands of some crystalline material that caught the light in strange ways, bending it into arcs and spirals. Every

so often, those arcs shimmered into shapes , eyes, runes, even brief flashes of distant landscapes , before fading again.

Students of every imaginable kind moved through the space. Elves walked with silent grace, their robes stitched with constellations that shifted from one moment to the next. Dwarves trudged along with chests of gear that floated beside them, pulled by invisible threads of magic. Humans chatted in clusters, some clutching steaming cups whose vapor coiled into tiny scenes that played out before fading. Here and there, Aarion caught glimpses of beings he couldn't easily name , a girl whose shadow didn't match her body, a boy with irises shaped like tiny rotating gears, a pair of identical twins walking back to back as though each was guarding the other.

The air carried dozens of scents , parchment, oil, flowers, faintly metallic ozone , all underpinned by the low hum of magic at work. Above them, spellbooks floated lazily between destinations, opening just enough to reveal moving diagrams before snapping shut again. At one junction, a group of young mages was practicing levitation on a stack of crates; one crate floated too far upward, prompting a robed instructor to simply blink at it, and the box zipped back into place as though yanked by an invisible rope.

Nyssa's eyes were everywhere, flicking from one group to another. "It's like a carnival," she murmured, "but with fewer pickpockets and more floating furniture."

Aarion was about to answer when the whispers returned. This time, they were sharper, threading through the noise like a separate layer of sound. He turned his head, trying to locate them, but the voices were slippery, shifting positions every few seconds. The words were still impossible to make out , except for one moment when they coiled into a single, breathy syllable that tugged at him.

He barely noticed when someone brushed past him. By the time he looked, the figure was already several steps away , a tall, older student with skin the color of midnight and hair tied back in a silver clasp. The stranger moved with deliberate slowness, and when their gaze met Aarion's, their eyes gleamed faintly silver. A faint smile curved their lips, not mocking but not entirely friendly either. Then, without a sound, they stepped sideways into a patch of shadow , and vanished. The hallway where they'd been was empty.

Nyssa had seen it too. "That… was normal here, right?"

"Do you think anything here is normal?" Aarion replied, glancing back at the spot where the figure had stood. The shadows there still seemed a shade darker than the rest.

They continued down the corridor, following the current of students toward the academy's inner gates. Magical signs floated overhead, their lettering constantly rewriting itself in different languages. As Aarion watched, one of them flickered into a script he recognized from a dream , curling, flame-like symbols , before changing again. The moment was brief, but it left a cold spot in his chest.

Halfway to the central plaza, they passed under a set of hanging lanterns that didn't burn with flame but with tiny galaxies swirling inside glass spheres. Each galaxy spun at a different speed, and every few seconds one would flare brightly as if reacting to the people beneath it. When Aarion stepped under the third lantern, the galaxy inside froze for a single heartbeat, its stars aligning into a pattern that looked disturbingly like his Mark. Then it spun again, leaving him to wonder if anyone else had noticed.

Nyssa nudged him. "You've got that look again , the one where you're about to ask me if I saw something weird."

He didn't answer. Not because she was wrong, but because the whispers had just shifted again, moving ahead of him like they were leading the way.

Aarion slowed his pace deliberately, letting the press of students pull him forward only in short bursts, his eyes scanning every corner. Every surface here seemed alive.

The floor tiles underfoot were not uniform but patterned in an intricate spiral that seemed to subtly rotate whenever you weren't looking directly at it. The walls carried tapestries that at first appeared static, but the longer he looked, the more they moved. In one, a knight rode endlessly toward a dark tower; in another, a great bird circled a mountain peak, its wings stretching far beyond the edge of the frame.

At a junction, they were forced to stop as a procession passed , four robed figures in white and gold, each carrying a staff topped with a glowing crystal. Between them floated a sphere of pure light, within which danced dozens of symbols shifting too quickly to read. Students on either side bowed their heads as the sphere passed, and Aarion felt an almost magnetic pull toward it, like it was calling him without sound. His Mark burned faintly in answer, and the whispers in the walls swelled briefly before fading again.

Nyssa, of course, did not bow. She simply folded her arms and muttered under her breath, "Parades. Always in the way."

They resumed walking and entered a long hallway lined with hovering globes of water, each containing a different creature , some like miniature dragons, others like tangled knots of light, one a perfectly normal-looking fish that winked at Aarion before darting behind a rock. A dwarf student noticed his curiosity and

grinned. “First years always stare at the Menagerie Hall. Don’t touch the globes unless you want detention.” Then, without waiting for a response, the dwarf wandered off.

The further they went, the more Aarion noticed how layered the sounds of the academy were. Beyond the obvious chatter and movement, there were constant undercurrents , the rustle of turning pages, the fizz of spells in progress, and somewhere beneath it all, the whispers. They had settled now into a steady rhythm, like a language spoken just too quietly to understand, always seeming to be coming from the next corner ahead.

As they turned into another corridor, a sharp pop sounded nearby, followed by a chorus of gasps. A student’s satchel had burst open mid-air, spilling quills, parchment, and a jar of inky black smoke. The smoke twisted into a small, cackling imp that darted upward toward the ceiling. A teacher in crimson robes stepped into its path, snapped their fingers, and the imp froze in place, let out a resigned sigh, and collapsed into harmless smoke. The teacher collected the jar without breaking stride, muttering something about “amateur enchantments.”

Nyssa watched it all with raised eyebrows. “And here I thought your magic was the dangerous kind.”

Aarion gave her a half-smile but didn't answer. His focus had shifted to a nearby archway, darker than the rest of the hall. Inside, he glimpsed a staircase spiraling downward, unlit and unmarked. No students were going in that direction, and even the hovering lights avoided drifting too close. The whispers seemed louder there, sharper, as if waiting for him to step closer.

Before he could, the flow of students pushed them onward into a large rotunda where the ceiling arched into a dome of stained glass. The glass depicted a battle between figures wreathed in fire and shadow, the flames flickering faintly as sunlight hit them from outside. At the center of the room, a floating brass map showed the entire academy, its towers and bridges shifting subtly as though alive. When Aarion passed near it, the map glowed brighter in one specific tower , a spire at the very edge of the floating grounds. He was about to mention it to Nyssa when the glow faded again.

Nyssa noticed his distracted expression and sighed. "If you're going to keep staring at every weird thing, we're going to be late to… whatever we're supposed to be doing."

But Aarion couldn't shake the feeling that the academy was not just showing itself to him , it was measuring him, piece by piece, and deciding something he couldn't yet name.

The crowd in the rotunda thinned as students dispersed toward different wings, revealing more of the walls. The lower panels were carved from a pale stone veined with silver, but the upper sections seemed to be woven from pure light, bending and shifting as if in a breeze no one could feel. Aarion realized after a moment that the patterns in the light were not random , they were words, letters flowing into sentences, then breaking apart again before he could focus on their meaning.

Nyssa wandered toward a nearby fountain, where water arched in slow, impossible loops before falling back into a shallow basin. A group of younger students sat around its edge, flicking coins into the water. Each coin sank partway before transforming , one became a tiny glass bird that flew away, another turned into a ribbon of smoke that wrapped around the thrower's wrist like a bracelet. One boy's coin transformed into a single glowing ember that hovered above the water's surface for several seconds before vanishing. Aarion caught himself wondering what his coin would become , and then felt the Mark pulse hard in his palm, as if warning him not to try.

A sudden commotion drew their attention to the far side of the room. Two students were locked in a heated argument, wands drawn, the air between them already crackling with unstable magic. Before they could release a single spell, the floor itself shifted beneath their feet, forming a narrow raised path that slid them both toward

a side door. The door opened silently, swallowed them, and shut again without a sound. The remaining students resumed their conversations as if nothing had happened.

Nyssa gave Aarion a sidelong look. “That’s one way to break up a fight.”

They passed under a series of tall, narrow windows where sunlight streamed in, refracted by layers of floating crystal shards suspended in mid-air. The light bent into shifting shapes , animals, faces, strange symbols , some of which lingered longer than others. Aarion stopped when one symbol formed directly in front of him, bright and sharp, identical to one he had seen in his dream the night before. As soon as he blinked, it dissolved into nothing.

A group of older students brushed past them, their uniforms marked with silver trim. They spoke in low, clipped tones, and Aarion caught only fragments , “Eastern Wing… sealed again… not ready…” , before their voices faded into the hum of the corridor.

They entered another wide hallway lined with floating shelves. Each shelf carried stacks of books and scrolls that occasionally drifted down to a student’s waiting hands before returning to their place. One book detached itself and floated directly toward Aarion, stopping just before him. Its cover was deep red leather, stamped with a symbol of interlocking circles. Slowly, the cover began

to open, but before it could reveal a single page, a tall, gaunt librarian in grey robes appeared, plucked it from the air, and replaced it on the highest shelf without a word.

Nyssa leaned close and whispered, “I think you almost stole from the wrong ghost.”

Further along, the hallway curved into a long gallery where statues stood in alcoves on either side. Some were clearly stone, but others shifted subtly , the flick of an eye, the turn of a hand. A half-dozen students paused here, offering brief bows or placing a hand on the base of the statues before moving on. Aarion copied the gesture, and when his palm touched one of the bases, he felt a quick rush of heat travel up his arm and vanish. The statue’s eyes flickered open for a fraction of a second, and he could have sworn it whispered something in a language he didn’t know.

By the time they reached the far end of the gallery, the crowd had thinned even more. The walls here were darker, lined with tall, sealed doors of black wood. Each was engraved with a unique sigil, none of which repeated. As they passed the third door, the Mark flared with heat, and a faint echo of his name came from beyond the wood. Aarion slowed, but Nyssa tugged his sleeve. “Not today,” she said, her tone unusually sharp.

The hallway ended at another set of double doors, carved from bronze and etched with spiraling runes. As they approached, the runes began to glow, and the doors swung open on their own. Beyond lay a sweeping staircase leading upward toward a cluster of balconies, where figures in long robes waited, clearly watching the newcomers.

Nyssa muttered, “Here comes the welcoming committee.” Aarion, however, couldn’t stop thinking about the black doors they had passed , and the fact that whatever was behind one of them already knew his name.

The staircase beyond the bronze doors rose in a slow, sweeping curve, its steps formed of transparent crystal that shimmered faintly with every footfall. Underneath the glass-like surface, Aarion could see faint streams of light running downward, like tiny rivers of molten gold flowing through the heart of the structure. It wasn’t just decorative , it felt alive, and the hum of magic here was stronger, as though the stairs themselves were feeding energy upward toward the academy’s higher levels.

Halfway up, Aarion caught sight of a narrow side passage that most of the crowd ignored. A single lamp burned at its entrance, its flame blue instead of gold. Something in that shade tugged at him , it was the same strange hue that had flickered through the Emberlight Express when they first crossed into the hidden platform.

But Nyssa's grip tightened on his arm, steering him back toward the main ascent. "We're already late," she murmured. "Don't wander off into candlelit murder corridors."

The staircase opened into a mezzanine lined with balconies overlooking the Grand Atrium far below. From here, Aarion could see how the light from the chandeliers wasn't static , it bent in waves, subtly shifting in rhythm with the movements of the crowd. If he focused, he could almost see patterns forming, shapes that flickered too quickly to name. A flicker of movement caught his attention , one of the luminous orbs that had floated among the students below was now hovering at eye level with him. It pulsed once, twice, then darted away toward an open archway.

The crowd of new arrivals was now funneled into a wide corridor where tall glass cylinders lined both walls. Inside each one floated a different object , a dagger with a blade made of starlight, a crown of thorns that dripped golden sap, a small wooden box that rattled faintly on its own. Small plaques beneath each cylinder described them in a looping script. One read: The Aether Compass , once pointed the way to the Lost Wing, sealed 237 years ago. Aarion felt the whispers surge faintly at that name, as though the walls themselves recognized it.

At the end of the hall, a sudden rush of air passed them, cool and sharp like the first breath before a storm. A tall

figure in pale blue robes walked by, their face hidden behind a mask shaped like a bird's beak. Students moved out of their path without hesitation. As they passed Aarion, the figure's head tilted slightly, and they murmured in a voice low enough that only he could hear: "You shouldn't be here yet." Then they were gone, leaving nothing but the fading sound of footsteps and the pulse of his Mark.

Nyssa stared after the masked figure. "Friendly place. You're getting all the good welcomes."

They emerged from the hall into another open space , this one smaller than the atrium but more ornate. The walls here were lined with narrow vertical mirrors, each framed in black iron twisted into strange knots. The mirrors did not reflect the current room but other places entirely , some showed classrooms, others open skies, one a dimly lit cavern with dripping water. A handful of students paused at certain mirrors, their faces pale as they stepped away quickly.

Aarion glanced into one and froze. The mirror showed him standing alone in a dark hallway lined with those same black sigil doors from before. Only this time, one of them was open, and something was standing in the doorway , tall, thin, its face hidden. His reflection's eyes widened, but before the figure in the doorway could move, the image dissolved into plain glass.

He took a step back, his pulse quickening. Nyssa's voice broke through. "What did you see?"

"Nothing," Aarion lied, though the Mark burned in silent contradiction.

They rejoined the crowd, the hum of whispers now blending into the background noise so naturally that it was hard to tell if they were hearing it at all , or if it had simply moved into their thoughts.

The crowd of newcomers eventually emerged into a vaulted hall, the ceiling painted with a mural of the sky , but this one moved in real time, clouds drifting lazily across a golden afternoon sun. A raised dais stood at the far end, where a broad-shouldered dwarf in a deep crimson coat waited. His beard was braided with gold rings, and his voice, when he spoke, carried like the rumble of distant thunder.

"Welcome to Luminaris Academy," he began, his tone as steady as the stone beneath their feet. "If you have come expecting comfort and idleness, turn around now. This place is a forge. You will be shaped , or broken."

Nyssa smirked. "Cheery fellow."

The dwarf's gaze swept across the crowd, pausing on a few faces , Aarion noticed the brief hesitation when those sharp eyes landed on him. "You will be assigned dormitories, each awarded your signatures. Respect the

wards; they will not respect you back if tampered with. Curfew is the third chime after dusk. The restricted wings are named for a reason , ignore that reason at your peril."

With a snap of his fingers, a series of floating parchments appeared, each glowing faintly. The parchments drifted into the crowd, one for each student. Aarion's sheet landed neatly in his hands, the ink still wet but not smudging when he touched it.

Name: Aarion Veylan

Dormitory: Obsidian Spire – Room 14

Assigned Wards: Flame Sigil – Level I Clearance

Roommates: Kaelith Draven, Serenya Duskvale, Tharos Ironfang

Nyssa peered over his shoulder. "Rooming with the locals already? Should I be jealous?"

A bell-like chime echoed through the hall, and the parchments rolled themselves into tight scrolls before vanishing into thin air. Glowing strands of light extended from the floor, forming paths in different directions. A robed attendant gestured. "Follow your assigned light. The wards will recognize you and open the way."

Aarion's path led toward a tall, narrow tower on the northern edge of the academy grounds. As they walked, the crowd thinned until only a handful of students remained on the same glowing trail. A lean young man in dark robes walked just ahead, his hair falling in a sharp line across one eye. The air around him carried a faint chill, and shadows seemed to cling just a moment too long where he stepped. Aarion guessed this must be Kaelith Draven.

Beside him strode a young elf woman in pale green, her hands clasped before her as though in prayer. Her eyes were bright, but distant , as if she were listening to something far away. Serenya Duskvale, Aarion thought, recalling the name. The last of their group was a massive dwarf in armor that looked like it had seen centuries of battle, an axe strapped across his back. Tharos Ironfang nodded once in greeting, the motion precise but not unfriendly.

The path brought them to a tall black arch at the base of the Obsidian Spire. Lines of crimson light pulsed through the stone as each student stepped forward. When Aarion approached, the light flared brighter than before, and a ripple passed through the archway like a shiver. Serenya's eyes flicked toward him, curiosity sharp in her gaze, but she said nothing.

Inside, the walls of the dormitory were carved from the same dark stone as the exterior, but here it glimmered

faintly, catching the light of floating crystal lanterns. The hallway curved upward in a spiral, doors set at intervals, each marked with a glowing sigil. Room 14 waited near the fourth landing, its sigil a flickering flame.

The moment Aarion touched the door, it swung inward on its own, revealing a spacious chamber divided into four sections. Each had a bed, desk, and small storage chest, but the decorations were wildly different. One corner was neatly organized, with books stacked in precise order , clearly Serenya's. Another was dim, the curtains drawn tight, a faint smell of burned incense drifting from within , Kaelith's. The third corner, Tharos's, was dominated by weapon racks and armor stands.

Aarion's own space was bare, waiting for him to claim it. He dropped his satchel onto the bed, then glanced toward the window. The view stretched far over the clouds, the academy's towers rising like pillars from the mist. For a moment, he thought he saw movement in the fog below , a flicker of shadow far too large to be human.

Behind him, Kaelith spoke for the first time, his voice low and even. "You'll hear them soon enough."

Aarion turned. "Hear who?"

Kaelith's eyes met his, the faintest curve of a smile on his lips. "The walls." Then he moved to his desk, leaving the words to hang in the air.

Night in the Obsidian Spire was different from the rest of the academy. The outer walls seemed to drink in the moonlight, leaving the corridors in a constant half-shadow. The floating lanterns here burned dimmer, their light more silver than gold. From his bed, Aarion could hear the faint crackle of the flame-sigil ward outside their door, pulsing once every few seconds like a slow heartbeat.

His roommates had settled quickly , Tharos polishing his axe before turning in, Serenya reading silently under the glow of a hovering crystal, Kaelith simply disappearing into his corner without a word. Nyssa had been assigned to a separate wing, but she had grinned as they parted. “Don’t get possessed without me.”

Aarion tried to rest, but the whispers began almost immediately. At first, they were faint , like wind sifting through cracks in the stone. Then they grew clearer, weaving around his thoughts until they were impossible to ignore. The words were still in no language he knew, yet something in him understood their tone: urgent, insistent… and calling.

He sat up, the Mark under his glove prickling with heat. Across the room, Serenya’s head tilted slightly, as if she, too, had heard something, but she didn’t look up from her book. Kaelith’s corner was dark, though Aarion thought he saw the faint gleam of eyes watching him.

The whispers tugged him toward the door. The moment his bare feet touched the stone floor, the ward outside dimmed , just for him , as though allowing his passage. He stepped into the hallway.

It was nearly silent here, save for the distant chime of some unseen clock. The spiral corridor curved downward, lit only by occasional lanterns. As he passed one, the glass flickered and the flame inside warped into a shape , a tall, thin figure with eyes like shards of ice. The image lasted a heartbeat, then vanished, leaving only the soft hiss of the lantern's light.

The whispers grew louder as he descended, guiding him past sleeping doors and empty landings. Finally, they led him to a section of the spire where the walls narrowed and the air felt colder. Here, the stone was darker still, veins of silver forming intricate spirals that almost looked like writing.

And then he saw a door. It wasn't marked with a student's sigil, nor with the academy's runes. Its surface was plain black, but it seemed to breathe faintly, as though alive. A slow creak filled the air, and the door began to open on its own.

A cold wind spilled out, carrying the scent of old smoke and something older still , something that made the hairs on his arms rise.

From the darkness beyond, a single voice whispered his name. Not in the half-heard tone of the walls, but clearly. Directly.

“Aarion…”

His hand moved toward the opening before he realized it, the Mark burning like fire.

And then , a shadow moved inside, impossibly fast, rushing straight toward him.

Ending line: Somewhere in these halls, something was waiting… and it knew exactly who he was.

– CHAPTER FOUR–

The Sorting of Essences

The bell of Luminaris tolled with a resonance that shook through the stone and the very air itself. Every new student, regardless of wing or tower, felt the vibration in their bones, and one by one they began to converge on the Great Atrium.

By daylight the hall had seemed vast, but tonight, beneath the suspended constellation of crystals, it was transformed into something otherworldly. The crystals hung in patterns that shifted every few moments , sometimes forming spirals, sometimes arcs like wings, and occasionally aligning into runes that glowed before dissolving again. Each crystal pulsed faintly in time with the students' footsteps, as though measuring the rhythm of their hearts.

Aarion and Nyssa slipped into the crowd, swept up in the buzz of anticipation. The murmur of voices filled the air, some nervous, some excited. An elf boy whispered that his sister had been claimed by Fire two years ago and returned home for summer blazing with power. A dwarf girl clutched a pendant shaped like a wave, muttering prayers to be aligned with Water. For some, the Sorting was destiny; for others, it was the weight of family expectation.

Nyssa folded her arms and smirked. "Bet you twenty coppers I get Fire."

“You’d set the copper on fire before paying me back,” Aarion replied, though his own nerves made his tone unsteady.

The air suddenly stilled, as if every sound had been drawn into silence. A hush swept over the Atrium, and from the upper balcony a figure emerged. Tall, robed in silver and indigo, with hair as white as freshly fallen snow, the Headmaster descended the central staircase. His staff clicked against the steps, each strike releasing a ripple of light that shimmered through the hall.

“Welcome, initiates,” his voice rang out, both gentle and commanding. “Tonight, you shall meet the truth of yourselves. The Sorting of Essences is not merely tradition , it is revelation. Within each of you lies the seed of an element, the current of a force older than kingdoms. When you touch the Crystal of Origins, it shall awaken, and from that moment, you will never be the same.”

His gaze swept the crowd, sharp as a blade despite the warmth of his tone. “Do not fear what is revealed. Even Shadow has its place beneath the stars.”

A wave of murmurs passed through the students at that last word. Aarion caught Nyssa’s eye; she shrugged, but her expression was taut.

At the center of the Atrium, the floor split apart with a low groan, and a pedestal rose from below. Upon it sat a

crystal unlike any other. Taller than a man, faceted with impossible geometry, its core swirled with shifting light , red flame, blue water, green earth, white air, and a deep, consuming black. As students drew closer, the crystal flared softly, as if acknowledging their presence.

The Headmaster raised his staff. “Step forward, one by one. Touch the crystal, and it will answer.”

Excitement rippled through the hall, nervous laughter mingling with awe. Aarion’s hand closed over his Mark beneath the glove. For reasons he couldn’t explain, the whispers that had haunted him since arrival were gone now. In their place was silence , the kind of silence that feels like waiting.

Nyssa elbowed him gently. “Well. Guess we’ll find out what kind of trouble we’re really in.”

The Atrium glowed like the heart of a star. The suspended crystals above shifted into an orbit of their own, moving in spirals so slow that it felt like watching time breathe. Every new intake of first-years stood below with heads tilted back, their faces painted in shades of awe.

Aarion shifted uncomfortably, one hand on his glove-covered palm. It was strange , the whispers that usually haunted him in stone halls had stilled completely. As if they were even waiting for what was about to happen.

From the far side of the dais, other figures joined the Headmaster. A tall woman with copper skin and eyes like molten bronze stepped forward, her armor polished to a shine but etched with runes that glowed faintly at her movements. Whispers rippled through the crowd: Lady Aravelle, Mistress of Combat and Earth Master. Beside her, an older elf robed in sea-green carried a staff crowned with a crystal shaped like a curling wave: Archmage Vaeloris of the Water Wing. One by one, the Masters of Elements revealed themselves, each standing in their place of honor. Only one pillar at the dais remained unoccupied , carved from onyx, its surface dull compared to the others. Nyssa leaned toward Aarion and muttered, “Guess Shadow doesn’t bother with formal introductions.”

The Headmaster raised a hand, and silence fell again. The Crystal of Origins pulsed brighter, and the air grew heavy with anticipation. The first name was called.

A girl with dark braids stepped forward, her eyes fixed on the glowing monolith. She pressed her palm to the surface, and immediately the crystal’s heart flared blue. The color spiraled upward, showering her in rippling waves of light. She gasped, laughing nervously as the symbol of Water appeared faintly on her forehead before fading. The Water Archmage inclined his head, satisfaction clear on his face.

The next student, a lanky boy, approached with trembling hands. The crystal flashed red the instant he touched it, flames curling across its surface before withdrawing. Lady Aravelle clapped him on the shoulder as he stumbled away, dazed but grinning. “Fire takes another,” she announced proudly.

One after another, students were claimed. Earth glowed in emerald, Air in brilliant white, Fire in crimson blaze, Water in cool blue. Each sorting earned cheers from the crowd , friends whooped, siblings cried out, entire groups erupted in applause. The atmosphere was alive, buzzing with both relief and envy.

But not every moment was smooth. One boy touched the crystal and held on for a long while with no response. The crystal dimmed faintly, then finally pulsed a pale gray that quickly faded. A murmur swept the hall. The Headmaster’s face softened. “Essence is patient,” he said firmly. “Sometimes it speaks later.” The boy walked away pale and shaken, clutching his robe like armor.

Nyssa exhaled slowly. “That’s comforting. Or terrifying.”

Aarion couldn’t answer. The Mark under his glove was throbbing harder now, not with pain but with something closer to a heartbeat. Every time a student touched the crystal, he felt the echo inside himself, as though he too were being tested by proxy.

As another student stepped forward, Aarion noticed something peculiar. Whenever Shadow appeared , rare, but it happened , the crystal didn't flare like with the others. It seemed to swallow the light instead, dimming the entire Atrium for a breath before returning to normal. Those students stepped away quickly, their faces pale, as if carrying a weight invisible to the rest.

One of the older students near the dais muttered, "Better a Shadow than unclaimed…" but his voice carried uneasily.

The Headmaster's staff struck the floor once more, and the crystals above shifted into a new pattern , a perfect circle, orbiting slowly. His voice boomed through the chamber. "The Crystal does not lie. It reveals truth, whether simple or complex. Some of you may carry more than one essence. If that happens, do not despair , but know that such a gift comes with a burden." His gaze swept the hall, piercing, almost as though directed at Aarion himself.

Nyssa gave him a sideways glance. "Dual essence, huh? Sounds rare. Don't get your hopes up."

But Aarion wasn't hopeful. He was unsettled. Something in the crystal's shifting heart seemed to be watching him back, waiting.

And then , the next name was called. The student stepped forward, palms trembling, and Aarion knew that very soon it would be his turn.

The Sorting line stretched like a river of nerves and anticipation. Every few moments, a cheer would rise when someone was claimed by a favored essence, followed by laughter and clapping from friends. But underneath the noise, the Atrium carried a strange hum , the crystals above resonated faintly with each Sorting, as if they were part of the ceremony itself, amplifying the choice of the Crystal of Origins.

One dwarf girl marched confidently to the pedestal, slapping her hand against the glowing monolith with no hesitation. For a long second nothing happened , then, with a booming crack, the crystal erupted in green light. The floor trembled, small pebbles breaking free from the stone and orbiting her head before settling back down. The Earth Master Lady Aravelle beamed proudly. “Strong roots, strong heart!” she declared, and the crowd roared approval.

A thin boy in spectacles came next, trembling so hard that his knees knocked together. He reached out with a squeak of fear , and the crystal flashed white with such sudden brilliance that several students shielded their eyes. His hair was blown upward in a gust of conjured wind, and when he stumbled back, his feet rose two inches off the ground before dropping again. “Air’s

blessing," Archmage Vaeloris noted with a faint smile. "If you learn not to faint every time, you'll fly far."

Laughter rippled through the hall, easing some of the tension.

Then came a curious case , a girl touched the crystal, and for several moments, it shimmered in two alternating hues: blue, then red, then back again. The Masters leaned forward, murmuring. Finally, the light settled into scarlet flame, but with a faint flicker of blue threading through. "Fire dominant," the Headmaster intoned, though his eyes narrowed in interest. "But the river calls as well. Such dual leanings must be watched."

Aarion's chest tightened. Dual leanings? His Mark pulsed like a drumbeat in response.

Not all sortings were graceful. One overeager boy practically lunged at the crystal, pressing both hands to it with dramatic flourish. Nothing happened for several breaths. Nervous laughter filled the hall. Finally, the crystal pulsed a weak ripple of pale blue and then dimmed again. The boy sagged, muttering, "At least it wasn't Shadow." His friends dragged him away, trying not to laugh too loudly.

In another case, a half-elf girl barely brushed the surface when the crystal erupted into a blaze of fire that spiraled up her arm and burst overhead in a shower of sparks. Nyssa let out a low whistle. "Show-off."

As more and more students were claimed, the faculty members occasionally conferred with one another. When a particularly strong glow appeared , a Fire flare that scorched the floor, a Water surge that drenched the pedestal, an Earthquake that cracked stone , the Masters scribbled notes on scrolls floating beside them.

And yet, through all of it, Aarion couldn't shake the sense that the crystal's core , that swirl of shifting light , kept flickering brighter whenever his eyes met it. It was almost like being stared at in return. His hand under the glove burned faintly, not painful but alive, restless.

The line was growing shorter. A dozen students left, then ten. The air grew heavier with each name called. The laughter quieted, replaced by the steady thrum of expectation. The Atrium itself seemed to lean inward, crystals orbiting slower, their glow deepening as though anticipating something unusual.

Nyssa nudged him with her elbow. "You're pale. Don't worry, you'll probably get Earth or something boring."

Aarion managed a tight smile, but his heart raced. When the next student stepped forward and the crystal pulsed white, all he could think was that soon it would be his turn , and whatever happened, everyone would be watching.

From the dais, the Headmaster raised his staff once again. His eyes glimmered as they swept over the

remaining students, lingering just a moment longer on Aarion. “Essence reveals not what you wish to be,” he said, his voice deep and resonant, “but what you are. And truth, children, is heavier than hope.”

The crystal pulsed in answer, a deep thrum that reverberated through the entire hall.

Aarion swallowed hard. His turn was coming.

The line had shrunk to its final few. Aarion stood frozen, every heartbeat echoing like a drum against his ribs. The Crystal of Origins loomed taller the closer he stepped, its surface gleaming with shifting colors that seemed almost aware of him. The Mark beneath his glove was burning now, not painfully but insistently, pulsing in rhythm with the crystal’s inner light.

“Next,” the Headmaster called.

His name was spoken. Aarion Veylan.

The crowd seemed to hush all at once. Every eye followed him as he walked toward the pedestal. His boots rang against the stone floor, the sound magnified in the heavy silence. He stopped before the crystal, staring into its heart. For a moment, he thought he saw his own reflection inside it , not his face, but a blur of firelight and water, endlessly clashing.

Slowly, he raised his hand. The whispers returned, faint at first, then swelling like a tide. They weren't words this time, but a call , urging him forward, as if the entire hall itself was holding its breath.

His palm pressed against the crystal.

At once, the chamber exploded with light. The Crystal of Origins flared so brightly that several students shielded their eyes, some crying out in surprise. The glow didn't settle into a single color , it surged in waves, blue rushing outward like an ocean storm, then bursting into brilliant silver-white radiance that filled every corner of the Atrium. The two lights clashed and intertwined, not canceling each other but fusing in dazzling spirals.

Gasps rippled through the crowd. "Two essences,?" "Is that,?" "Impossible…"

The Masters leaned forward urgently, murmuring to one another. Archmage Vaeloris's eyes were wide, reflecting the blue glow, while the silver-haired Headmaster's grip tightened on his staff. Only Lady Aravelle looked impressed, her bronze eyes glinting as though she saw potential in the chaos.

Above them, the suspended crystals rearranged themselves, forming not a rune but a symbol none could immediately name , a swirling circle split by a line of light.

Aarion staggered back, the glow clinging to him, dancing across his skin before fading. His Mark burned hot, its runes flaring briefly through the glove. He clenched his fist, hoping no one else noticed.

The Headmaster's voice was calm, but beneath it lay tension. "Water and Light. Rare. Perhaps… unprecedented."

Uneasy murmurs spread through the hall. Some voices whispered admiration, others fear. "Light? Is that even an essence?" "Two? No one survives two for long…"

Aarion felt every gaze on him like a weight. For a heartbeat he wanted to melt into the floor, but the glow around his hand pulsed once more , proud, defiant.

Then Nyssa's name was called.

She strode forward with none of Aarion's hesitation, smirking as if the entire hall were an audience just for her. "Watch this," she muttered, casting a wink over her shoulder. She slammed her palm against the crystal.

It burst instantly into scarlet fire. The light roared outward, sparks showering around her, flickering across her hair like a crown of flame. The Fire sigil burned above her brow before sinking into her skin. She turned back to Aarion with a grin so fierce it was almost triumphant. "Told you. Fire suits me."

The hall erupted in cheers at the display, but the excitement didn't erase the unease from Aarion's Sorting. While Nyssa basked in applause, several of the Masters continued whispering to each other, stealing furtive glances at Aarion.

And in that moment, even through the noise of the crowd, he could hear them again , the whispers. Stronger now. Clearer. He carries more than flame or tide… he carries the light we lost.

A chill ran down his spine. Whatever had just happened, it was not simply a blessing. It was a warning.

For several moments after the flare, silence clung to the Atrium. The crystal's glow dimmed slowly, leaving behind streaks of silver and blue that shimmered in the air before dissolving like mist.

The Masters broke first. Archmage Vaeloris's voice was a whisper sharp with disbelief. "Water and… Light? The records speak of the four , Water, Fire, Earth, Air. Shadow was acknowledged centuries later. But Light…" He trailed off, his fingers tightening around his staff.

Lady Aravelle's copper eyes gleamed with something close to hunger. "If the crystal names it, it cannot be denied. Rare or not, Light has returned."

Another Master, cloaked in gray, shook his head. His face was obscured, but his voice carried clear disdain.

“Or the boy is unstable. Such conflux is dangerous. A dual essence is no gift , it is a fracture waiting to spread.”

The Headmaster silenced them with a raised hand, though his expression betrayed unease. “The crystal does not err. But we must tread carefully.”

Meanwhile, the students’ whispers rippled like a storm. Some stared at Aarion with awe. “Two essences,imagine the power!” Others muttered with suspicion. “Light? I’ve never heard of it… what if it’s cursed?” A boy hissed to his friend, “No one should carry two. He’ll break before the year is out.”

Aarion felt the weight of every word. His chest was tight, his skin still tingling from the crystal’s touch. The whispers in his head surged again , louder now, almost drowning the crowd. Bearer of Light. Keeper of the lost tide. The walls remember.

He staggered slightly, pressing a hand to his temple. Nyssa grabbed his arm, grounding him. “Hey. Ignore them.” Her grin faltered as she studied his pale face. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m fine,” he lied, though the Mark beneath his glove flared with a heat that nearly burned.

The Headmaster’s voice cut through the noise. “Enough. The Sorting is revelation, not judgment. Let the boy stand.” He turned to Aarion, his tone softer, almost

warning. “Water and Light. You will be watched closely, Veylan. Do not mistake rare for untouchable.”

The crystal pulsed once more before falling still, as if sealing the truth in its depths.

When Nyssa stepped forward for her turn, the mood shifted. The crystal’s reaction to her was immediate, almost joyous , a roar of crimson fire, sparks bursting in the air like fireworks. The crowd erupted in cheers, relieved to witness something familiar, something safe.

“Fire,” Lady Aravelle announced with pride, her voice carrying. “A blaze that does not bend.”

Nyssa basked in it, throwing Aarion a cocky grin. “Told you I’d set the room alight.”

But even as the hall celebrated her, the attention inevitably returned to him. He could feel their stares like heat against his back , curiosity, envy, and fear mingled in equal measure.

Some students kept their distance as he returned to the line. A few whispered prayers under their breath. Others looked at him as if he were already marked for greatness , or doom.

Kaelith Draven, the shadow mage assigned as his roommate, was among the next in line. His Sorting came quietly: the crystal dimmed, shadows curling over his

hand before withdrawing into black silence. No cheers followed , only uneasy murmurs. But Kaelith's smirk as he walked away was faint and knowing, as though he saw something in Aarion's Sorting others did not.

Aarion clenched his fists. The Mark burned, and the whispers clawed at his mind. Not just a student. Not just a boy. Chosen, broken, waiting.

He wanted to scream at them to stop, to let him breathe, but he could not. He could only stand, feeling the judgment of the entire Atrium pressing down on him.

When the final student was sorted and the crystal sank back into the pedestal with a grinding rumble, the Headmaster raised his staff. "So the year begins. Water, Fire, Earth, Air, Shadow , and perhaps…" His gaze flicked to Aarion. "…something more. Your Essences are your bonds. They will shape your path. But remember this , Luminaris does not bend for you. You must bend to it."

The suspended crystals above rearranged once more, this time into five perfect orbits circling the hall. Yet faint, faint, just beyond their glow, Aarion thought he saw a sixth , a pale shimmer of silver-white, vanishing before he could be sure.

The cheers that followed felt hollow to him. Where others celebrated, he only felt the cold certainty of being

seen by something larger than himself. Something that was waiting.

As Aarion stepped back into the crowd, the Atrium's air remained heavy, unsettled. The echoes of the crystal's flare hadn't yet faded; streaks of silver-white shimmered faintly above his head before vanishing. Students gave him a wide berth as if his very presence might trigger another eruption.

Some whispered with awe.

"Two essences… that's like being twice as strong."

"Water and Light. Imagine the control."

Others muttered darker thoughts.

"Duals don't last. Their minds break."

"Light? That's not in the records. What if it's a trick?"

A group of older students in the upper balcony leaned forward, their faces shadowed. One of them sneered. "If he thinks that makes him special, let him survive the Trials first."

Aarion's ears burned. He wanted to disappear into the floor, yet the Mark beneath his glove pulsed hotly, defiant, as though daring him to claim the spotlight instead of shrinking from it.

On the dais, the faculty had gathered close in hushed conversation.

Archmage Vaeloris's voice carried a tremor. "Headmaster, this is beyond precedent. The last reference to Light was in the sealed archives , centuries old, dismissed as myth."

Lady Aravelle's jaw tightened. "Myth or not, the crystal has spoken. He bears both water and light. That makes him… dangerous, yes, but valuable."

The cloaked gray-robed Master leaned forward, voice sharp. "Valuable to whom? To the Academy, or to those who would seek to claim him? What happens when Shadow takes notice? We cannot parade a child as a miracle when he might be a weapon."

The Headmaster's eyes, sharp as a falcon's, lingered on Aarion below. "He is both. Miracle, and weapons. Our duty will be to see which he becomes."

The tension at the dais was palpable, though the younger students noticed only fragments.

Meanwhile, Nyssa shoved through the onlookers to stand by Aarion's side. Her grin was still cocky, but her eyes flicked uneasily toward the Masters. "Well, you certainly know how to steal a show."

"I didn't ask for it," Aarion muttered.

“You think I asked to be fired?” she snorted. “It doesn’t matter what they whisper. It matters what you do with it. So hold your head up, Veylan, or I’ll set your boots on fire.”

Despite himself, a weak laugh escaped him. For a heartbeat, the suffocating pressure lifted.

But not for long.

Kaelith Draven’s Sorting had ended moments earlier, the shadows clinging to him like smoke before vanishing. He lingered near the edge of the crowd, his sharp features unreadable. His eyes , dark, depthless , found Aarion’s across the hall. For an instant, the whispers in Aarion’s skull surged again, louder, clearer:

Two paths. One to bind, one to break. Shadow knows the light. Shadow waits.

Aarion stiffened, breath catching. Had the voice come from the walls again, or from Kaelith himself? The shadow mage smirked faintly, as if amused by the confusion, then turned away.

The final students completed their Sortings, the crystal dimming gradually until it stood inert once more. The ground trembled as the pedestal sank back beneath the floor with a deep grinding sigh, sealing the ceremony’s end.

The Headmaster raised his staff, voice echoing with authority. “The sorting is complete. Tonight, you have learned what binds you. These Essences are not merely powers to wield, but truths to carry. They will shape your friendships, your trials, and your destiny.”

His gaze swept the hall, but again, it lingered on Aarion for a fraction longer. “For some, that destiny is clear. For others… it will be tested.”

The Atrium erupted in cheers as the suspended crystals above aligned into five glowing orbits. Yet Aarion saw something no one else seemed to notice , faint, pale streaks of light weaving between the five like a hidden thread, forming a sixth circle for just a heartbeat before fading again.

The crowd roared with excitement, but Aarion felt none of it. He touched his chest where Mark throbbed under his glove, and the whispers brushed his ear once more, almost tender, almost mocking.

Chosen child… the light you carry is not yours alone.

The Atrium should have erupted into celebration. Students cheered for friends, shouted house chants, even burst into laughter when some stumbled back from the crystal dizzy with power. Yet beneath the surface, a current of unease ran strong, directed at one boy in particular.

Aarion could feel it in the way people glanced at him , too quickly, then looked away, as though staring too long might invite the same fate. A few braver ones whispered openly.

“Light? That’s not in any Essence book I’ve read.”

“He touched the crystal like everyone else, but it nearly broke. Did you see that flare?”

“He won’t last. No one holds two essences. They split.”

Others spoke with awe.

“He’s special. Maybe a chosen one.”

“Water and Light. Imagine the spells he’ll be able to weave.”

“Or imagine the mess when he loses control.”

The voices washed over him, both heavy and hollow. His skin prickled with heat where the Mark pulsed under his glove. He forced his jaw tight and kept walking, but the whispers in his mind rose with the same rhythm as the crowd’s gossip. Chosen. Broken. Bearer. Betrayer.

He staggered near one of the crystal-lit columns, gripping the cold stone for balance. The Atrium shimmered faintly around him, and for a moment he thought the walls themselves bent closer. The whispers clarified into something almost like words:

Do not trust the walls. They speak. And they have seen this before.

A chill swept down his spine. That last sentence hadn't come from his own thoughts , it was the same warning the armored stranger had spoken back at the station.

"Hey," Nyssa's voice snapped him back. She had elbowed her way through the crowd, planting herself firmly at his side like a shield. Her grin was still there, but her eyes were sharp. "Ignore them. Half of them are jealous, the other half are scared of their own shadows. You're not breaking apart anytime soon."

"Feels like I already am," Aarion muttered, low enough that only she could hear.

Nyssa punched his arm lightly. "Then stick together until you're not. Fire and Light , what could go wrong?"

The irony of her joke almost made him laugh, but his throat was too tight.

On the dais, the Masters dispersed slowly, their robes and armor trailing glimmers of elemental magic. Yet a few lingered, their discussion hushed but urgent.

Archmage Vaeloris: "Light was last recorded in the Chronicles of Dawn. The Order sealed those scrolls for a reason."

Lady Aravelle: “Which makes it all the more important to study him.”

Gray-Robed Master: “Or to control him. Before others seek him out.”

The Headmaster raised his staff, silencing them without a word. His gaze once more settled on Aarion , not with malice, but with a kind of sorrowful recognition.

Meanwhile, the crowd began to disperse into clusters. Friends hugged each other, celebrating being sorted into matching Essences. Rivalries already sparked between groups , a few Fire students mocked an Air student for fainting during his flare; Water students formed tight circles, comparing symbols glowing faintly on their palms.

And then there were those who cast sidelong looks at Aarion, speaking just loud enough for him to hear.

“If he’s Light, does that mean he’s holy? Or cursed?”

“Two Essences , means twice the enemies.”

“Keep away from him. Just in case.”

Nyssa whirled on one pair of gossips, her eyes practically sparkling. “Say it to his face, cowards.” They scurried off, muttering.

Aarion shook his head. “Nyssa,”

“Don’t. They’ll learn fast enough you’re not to be messed with.” She tossed her hair back defiantly. “Besides, if you break, I’ll just glue you back together with fire.”

Despite the tension, Aarion smiled faintly. Nyssa’s fire wasn’t just her Essence , it was her nature. Fierce, reckless, and loyal.

But the whispers didn’t fade. They lingered at the edge of his thoughts, more insistent than before. This time, they formed a phrase so clear it sent ice through his veins:

The child of duality will either mend the fracture… or become it.

He flinched, but when he looked around, no one else seemed to have heard.

At the edge of the crowd, Kaelith Draven stood alone, shadows clinging faintly to his frame even though the Sorting was over. His eyes met Aarion’s across the hall. A smirk tugged at his lips, not mocking but knowing, like someone who had already read the ending of a story Aarion hadn’t even begun.

The Mark under Aarion’s glove pulsed once more, answering something in Kaelith’s gaze.

The pedestal sank with a groan, the crystal vanishing beneath the floor, and the Headmaster lifted his staff high. “The sorting is done,” he declared, his voice rolling through the Atrium. “What you carry now is not a burden but the truth. Embrace it, or it will consume you.”

The suspended crystals above aligned into perfect orbits of five , but Aarion’s eyes caught a faint shimmer weaving between them. A sixth circle, silver-white, barely there before dissolving.

And he knew, deep down, that his journey at Luminaris had only just begun.

The Emberlight Express had been magnificent, the Atrium had been breathtaking, but nothing prepared Aarion for what came next.

The students were herded out of the great hall by shimmering banners that floated overhead, guiding them through wide corridors that opened to the sky. And then the clouds parted.

The Luminaria Oval hung suspended in the heavens like a jewel. Its vast circular field floated above storm-clouds, supported by nothing but runes carved into the air itself. Spires of light rose from its edges, etched with symbols of every Essence. The stadium seats curved like a colossal crown, filled with hovering lanterns that cast a glow brighter than the sun.

Gasps and cheers erupted from the first-years. Some pressed against the railings, craning their necks in wonder. Nyssa whistled low. “Well, if this is where they play games, I can’t wait to see what detention looks like.”

The Headmaster’s voice thundered magically across the Oval. “Students of Luminaris! Each year begins not with books and quills, but with fire and trial. The Essence Trials! Here, you prove not just your affinity, but your spirit. You will compete, not to win, but to bond. For in this place, your teams are forged.”

The floor of the Oval rippled like water, then reformed itself into a glowing cricket pitch. Enchanted wickets rose from the ground, shimmering with light. Dozens of gleaming balls hovered above, each etched with runes that flared and shifted , some glowing harmlessly, others sparking with volatile bursts of energy.

The crowd roared.

Banners appeared in the air, naming the two teams for the opening match:

Lumeria Lecars – clad in azure and silver.

Shadow Falcons – draped in black and crimson.

The names echoed through the stadium, cheers and jeers mingling in a storm of sound.

Aarion felt a rush of air swirl around him as a silver banner dropped at his feet. His name shimmered across it, glowing brighter than the rest. He blinked. “What,?”

The Headmaster raised his staff. “By the decree of the Crystal, Aarion Veylan will lead the Lumeria Lecars. Wicket-keeper, and captain.”

A stunned hush followed, then a wave of excited whispers. Nyssa shoved his shoulder with a grin. “Well, Captain, better not drop the ball. Or, y’know, explode it.”

Aarion’s heart hammered, but he stepped forward, lifting the silver banner. The cheers of his team rose around him, though he could still feel the burning stares of those unsettled by his dual essence.

Opposite him, the Shadow Falcons assembled. Their leader, Kaelen Duskbane, stood at their front. He was tall, with hair black as midnight and eyes that gleamed like smoldering coals. His presence drew silence, his aura heavy with dark confidence.

Beside him stood his team:

Veyra Nocturne, sharp-eyed wicket-keeper with movements like a predator.

Draven Ashmoor, a fast bowler whose very grip smoked with shadow-flame.

Sylas Crowmere, an all-rounder with a twisted grin.

Morwen Nightshade, a spinner who whispered incantations into the ball before each throw.

The moment Kaelen's gaze met Aarion's, a smirk tugged at his lips , not mocking, but challenging. "Let's see if Light can survive Shadow," he murmured, just loud enough for Aarion to hear.

A chill coursed through him, but he gripped the banner tighter.

The Headmaster struck the pitch with his staff. The runes flared, and the hovering balls aligned above the field, glowing like miniature suns and stars. The stadium trembled with anticipation.

“The Essence Trials begin!”

Nyssa cracked her knuckles, her hands already sparking faint flame. “Captain. Let’s burn them down.”

Aarion swallowed, eyes fixed on Kaelen and his dark team across the field. His pulse thundered in his ears. The Atrium had chosen him, the crystal had branded him, and now the Oval demanded proof.

For the first time since the Sorting, he felt no whispers, no doubt. Just fire in his veins and light in his chest.

The game had begun.

The Luminaria Oval seemed alive. The runes carved into the floating field pulsed in rhythm with the cheering crowd. Enchanted lanterns shaped like phoenixes swooped overhead, trailing streams of golden fire before dissolving into sparks. Crystalline guardians, half-statue and half-beast, prowled along the edge of the pitch , their eyes glowing faintly, watching as if ready to intervene should a spell run too wild.

Students from older years filled the stands, their robes and house colors blazing like banners. Some waved enchanted flags that released bursts of colored smoke, spelling out the names of their favorites. Teachers occupied high seats carved from cloudstone, their expressions a mixture of stern focus and quiet

excitement. Even the Headmaster, solemn as he was, allowed himself the faintest curve of a smile.

The pitch itself shimmered, lines glowing faint silver. The wickets thrummed with faint energy, reforming whenever disturbed, while the floating balls above glowed in varied hues: red sparks, blue streams, violet shadows, golden arcs. Each was unpredictable, carrying enchantments that would test not only strength but creativity.

Aarion stood with the Lumeria Lecars, his banner shimmering in silver and azure above their heads. His teammates clustered around him, buzzing with nerves.

Nyssa, fiery as ever, cracked her knuckles and muttered, "Just give me the bat. I'll turn their shadows to ashes."

Another teammate, a water-born boy named Calen, shook his head. "It's not about smashing. It's about balance. The ball listens to Essence if you're careful."

"Balance is boring," Nyssa shot back.

Aarion listened, his hand tightening on the wicket-keeper's gloves that had appeared magically upon his palms. They were etched with runes that faintly glowed, ready to absorb the wild enchantments of the balls. His heart thudded like a drum. He didn't feel ready, but the Mark beneath his glove pulsed , not in pain this time, but in rhythm, as though eager.

Across the field, the Shadow Falcons gathered. Kaelen Duskbane's presence drew eyes without effort. He stood tall, his shadowed aura spreading faint tendrils across the pitch before retracting. Beside him, Draven Ashmoor spun a ball in his palm, its surface already smoking. Morwen Nightshade muttered to herself, her hands weaving small shadow-runes into the air. Sylas Crowmere laughed loudly, pointing at the Lecars as if mocking their chances.

Kaelen raised his head, his eyes locking with Aarion's. He tilted his chin, a silent challenge.

The Headmaster's staff struck once, and the pitch blazed with light. "Teams, prepare!"

The first ball descended from the hovering cluster. It was a glowing ember-sphere, its surface crackling with fiery sparks that hissed like serpents.

"Shadow Falcons to bowl first," the announcer's enchanted voice boomed.

Draven Ashmoor stepped forward, tall and broad, his arm wreathed in smoke. His grin was sharp as he spun the ember-ball once more. "Hope you like surprises," he muttered.

Nyssa strode to the batting crease, her bat shimmering with crimson flame as she swung it once, releasing a trail of sparks. "Hit me with your best shot, shadow-boy."

The crowd roared in anticipation.

Draven charged, his steps heavy like thunder. He flung the ember-ball, and it didn't just fly , it shrieked through the air, splitting into three fiery trails before reforming into one again.

Nyssa met it with a fierce swing. Her bat ignited, flames roaring outward as wood met ember. Sparks exploded, showering the pitch. The ball arced into the sky, bursting into a fountain of firework-like light before the enchantment reformed it mid-air, sending it plummeting back down.

Aarion darted forward as the wicket-keeper, his gloves glowing. The ball hit with a crack that shook his arms, heat biting through even the enchantments. He staggered, then held firm, the silver glow of his gloves locking the ember-ball in place.

The crowd erupted in cheers. "Lecars! Lecars! Lecars!"

Nyssa shot Aarion a triumphant grin. "Told you, Captain. We've got this."

But across the pitch, Kaelen Duskbane only smiled, faint and calculating. His dark eyes lingered on Aarion, and for a moment, the whispers brushed his mind again.

This is not a game. This is the first move.

The stadium roared around him, but Aarion felt a shiver deep in his bones.

The ember-ball Aarion caught still smoked faintly in his gloves, glowing as if alive. He tossed it back, the crowd cheering, but his arms ached from the weight of its heat. If that was only the first throw, what awaited them next?

Draven Ashmoor grinned darkly and picked another ball from the floating cluster. This one pulsed black-red, veins of shadow running across its surface. The announcer's voice boomed: "Beware the Veil-Ball! Known to vanish and reappear at will!"

Nyssa tightened her grip on the bat, fire licking across her shoulders. "Perfect. Let's see if I can hit something that doesn't want to be hit."

Draven roared and hurled the ball. It shot forward, then vanished mid-air. Gasps erupted from the crowd. Nyssa twisted, searching. A flicker of black appeared behind her, then in front , too fast. She swung wildly, her bat slicing flames into empty air.

The Veil-Ball reappeared at the stumps with a hiss. Aarion lunged, gloves snapping forward just as it phased half-through the wicket. His runes flared, dragging the ball fully back into reality, locking it into his grasp.

The crowd went wild. "Keeper! Keeper! Keeper!"

Draven's grin faltered. Nyssa, though, laughed, tossing Aarion a wink. "Not bad, Captain. Keep that up, and we might actually win."

But the game wasn't waiting. The next ball chosen shimmered with icy-blue frost. When Draven bowled, the pitch itself froze in a streak, shards of crystal erupting from the ground. Nyssa struck, the collision sending a burst of snow exploding across the field. Her shot sent the ball curving toward the crowd, where shimmering wards caught it and reset it above the pitch. The runs counted.

"Four runs to Lecars!" the announcer shouted.

Their side erupted in cheers, silver banners flashing. Nyssa bowed theatrically. "See? Balance is boring. Fire works fine."

But their luck didn't last. When Morwen Nightshade took the ball, whispering in her strange tongue, the air thickened. The sphere she released rolled unnaturally slow, almost lazy. Nyssa, impatient, swung too hard. The ball curved as though alive, dipped low, and clipped the wicket with a ping.

"Out!"

The Shadow Falcons howled in triumph, their crimson banners flaring. Nyssa growled, stomping back toward her team. "Trick ball. Doesn't count."

“Everything counts,” Aarion reminded, his tone gentler than hers. “We adapt.”

The next batter, a nervous Earth-essence boy named Roderin, stepped up. His bat shook in his hands. Morwen smirked, rolling another whispering ball. This time, Roderin missed entirely , the ball struck his pad, shadows flaring. “Out again!”

The Lecars’ cheers dimmed, replaced by murmurs of unease.

Kaelen Duskbane himself stepped forward now, his presence alone silencing the crowd. He plucked a ball from the air , silver-black, its surface swirling like a storm. His gaze fixed on Aarion, not the batter. “Let’s see,” he murmured. “Can Light catch Shadow?”

He bowled. The ball didn’t fly straight , it curved mid-air, then split into two, then three, each aimed not at the batter, but at the keeper. Aarion’s chest seized. Instinct screamed to duck. But his Mark burned, the light flaring through the glove.

Time slowed. He saw the three balls clearly, knew which was real, and lunged. His gloves blazed as they closed around it, silver and blue light surging outward, dispersing the false images.

The crowd gasped, then cheered thunderously.

But Kaelen didn't look surprised. His smirk only deepened. "So it wakes, after all."

Aarion's breath hitched. The whispers in his head surged, fierce and urgent. This is no trial. This is a hunt.

He clutched the ball, chest heaving, as the stadium roared with joy , completely unaware of the shadows coiling beneath the game.The sun dipped low above the floating clouds as the Luminaria Oval roared with anticipation. Thousands of enchanted lanterns lit the air, glowing like stars, circling the grand stadium. The ground itself shimmered with runes, the pitch stretching out like a stage built for legends.

On one side, dressed in azure and silver, stood Lumeria Lecars. Aarion, their newly chosen captain, adjusted his gloves, the weight of responsibility heavy but thrilling. Beside him, Nyssa Moonveil twirled her bat, fire sparks flickering at her fingertips.

Across the pitch, shadows gathered. The Shadow Falcons, cloaked in black and crimson, marched in with intimidating precision. At their lead was Kaelen Duskbane, tall, sharp-eyed, with a smile that never reached his eyes. His very presence seemed to dim the lanterns above.

The umpire, an old wizard with a silver beard, raised his staff. "By the order of the Academy,let the Essence Trials begin!"

The enchanted ball, etched with glowing runes, floated into the air before dropping into the Falcon bowler's hand. Draven Ashmoor, a lean figure with a cruel grin, spun it once, and black mist trailed from his fingers.

Aarion crouched behind the stumps, his senses alive. The air hummed with magic. He could feel the pitch itself responding, alive with expectation.

The first ball whistled through the air, bending unnaturally mid-flight. Nyssa swung hard, sending it screaming across the field in a blaze of fire. The crowd erupted. The runes above the Oval pulsed in rhythm with the cheer.

But Aarion stayed focused. He knew this was not just a game. The Shadow Falcons were playing for more than victory.

Kaelen's eyes met across the pitch. That smile again,cold, dangerous, promising trouble.

The Luminaria Oval was alive with chaos and wonder. Enchanted banners of silver and azure floated above the Lecars' side, while crimson-black falcons swooped through the air, crying out eerily as they circled the Shadow Falcons' stands. The crowd wasn't just human , shimmering spirits, glowing wisps, and even stone golems filled the seats, chanting for their favorite team.

Aarion adjusted his gloves again. His heartbeat thundered like a drum, but his face stayed calm. He crouched low, eyes locked on the pitch. This is more than a game, he thought. This is my first test.

The Shadow Falcons had taken the field with unsettling grace. Kaelen Duskbane, their captain, tapped his bat on the ground once , and the sound echoed like thunder, as if the Oval itself acknowledged him. His team stood behind him like predators waiting for the hunt.

At the other end, Draven Ashmoor began his run-up. His footsteps left faint trails of smoke; his eyes glinted with cruel amusement. With a flick of his wrist, he released the glowing ball. It didn't fly straight , it twisted, cutting through the air like a living thing.

Nyssa stepped forward. Her eyes burned with determination. At the last instant, fire erupted along her bat, and with a loud crack she struck the ball. It blazed across the field, a streak of molten orange. The Lumeria supporters screamed in delight, their voices shaking the clouds overhead.

But the Falcons were not impressed. Veyra Nocturne, their sharp-tongued wicket-keeper, caught the ball on the boundary with a leap so precise it seemed inhuman. She tossed it back lazily, smirking at Nyssa. "You'll have to do better than fire tricks," she called across the pitch.

The next over came. Morwen Nightshade, the Falcons' spinner, walked in slowly, whispering something under her breath. As she bowled, the ball split into three glowing shadows, all hurtling toward Aarion's stumps.

Gasps filled the stadium. Aarion, crouched low, saw the trick instantly. His instincts screamed which one was real. In one swift motion, he lunged sideways, snatching the true ball in his gloves. The two illusions exploded into harmless smoke.

The crowd erupted. Lumeria banners shimmered brighter, and Aarion's teammates pounded his back in celebration. But across the pitch, Kaelen only clapped slowly, his dark smile fixed on Aarion.

"You see it too, don't you?" Kaelen muttered under his breath, almost too soft to hear.

Aarion froze. For a second, he thought he imagined it. But Kaelen's smirk told him otherwise.

The game pressed on. Thalen Brightforge, the power hitter of Lumeria, smashed a colossal six, the ball glowing so bright it burst into a shower of sparks as it crossed the boundary. The Lecars roared with confidence, rallying behind Aarion.

And yet,through it all,Aarion couldn't shake the chill that Kaelen's words had left behind.

This wasn't just about victory. The Shadow Falcons were hiding something.

Aarion's gloves still tingled from the catch, his palms alive with faint sparks of light as the crowd's cheer swelled like a tidal wave, echoing across the clouds. For a moment pride surged in his chest, this was his chance to prove himself not just as a player but as a leader. Yet Kaelen's words echoed again in his ears: You see it too, don't you? The smirk, the tone,it wasn't arrogance, it was something sharper, almost a warning. Aarion's heartbeat quickened, not from the thrill of the match but from something colder. He whispered to himself, barely audible, "This isn't just about victory. They're playing another game entirely."

The next delivery came from Draven Ashmoor. This time the ball wasn't cloaked in smoke but glowing faintly with crimson cracks, as if fire was trapped inside it. He hurled it with impossible speed, and Nyssa swung with all her might, sparks of flame exploding on contact, but the ball didn't fly. Instead it froze midair for a fraction of a second, then shot upward like a streak of lightning, vanishing into the sky. The crowd gasped in confusion, only to erupt again in shock as the ball came crashing down from the clouds aimed not at the stumps but at Aarion's head. Instinct saved him. He dove sideways, gloves snapping shut just as the ball missed his face by inches. The impact rattled his arms, the runes etched into the pitch flaring wildly in protest.

The umpire's staff struck the ground. "Control your essence, Ashmoor!" he thundered, but Draven only grinned, eyes glinting with cruel delight. Nyssa rushed over, fire flickering at her fingertips, ready to strike if needed. "You all right, Captain?" she asked. Aarion forced a nod, his eyes never leaving Kaelen. The rival captain hadn't moved, only tilted his head slightly, studying him like prey under a predator's gaze. Around them the match surged on,Thalen Brightforge smashed a colossal boundary, his laughter booming across the stadium, while Elira Windfern's spinning delivery curved like a ribbon of air to topple a Falcon's wicket. The Lecars were winning, their skill and passion shining brighter with every move, but Aarion could not celebrate. Every step, every play from the Falcons carried something more, something hidden beneath the guise of sport.

The seventh over brought the proof. Morwen Nightshade stepped forward, shadows swirling at her feet. Her whisper carried into the air like smoke. She bowled, and the ball rolled innocently at first before splitting into five shadow-clones, each spinning with unnatural speed. The stadium gasped, the Lecars faltered for a heartbeat, but Aarion's gloves tingled again, glowing faintly. His instincts sharpened like a blade,third from the left. That was the real one. Without hesitation he lunged, catching the true ball in his hands as the others exploded into black smoke curling into nothingness. The crowd erupted once more, chanting his name, their voices

shaking the lanterns above the Oval. Aarion raised the ball high, triumphant, but his chest tightened. This wasn't skill or showmanship. This was a test.

From the boundary line Kaelen clapped again, slow and deliberate. His black eyes locked with Aarion's, a spark of recognition flashing between them. "You're different," Kaelen whispered, his voice carried on the wind though no one else could hear. "And that makes you dangerous." Aarion's breath caught in his throat. The scoreboard glittered with numbers, the Lecars still held the lead, and the crowd roared in victory, but Aarion didn't cheer. His gloves tightened, his gaze fixed on the Shadow Falcons, and the realization hit him like a storm. This wasn't just about victory. The Shadow Falcons were hiding something.

The air inside Luminaria Oval thickened as the match pressed deeper, the runes on the field pulsing with every surge of magic. The crowd still roared for the Lecars, their chants echoing through the night like rolling thunder, but beneath the noise Aarion could feel it,a distortion, a tremor in the balance of essence itself. Every move the Shadow Falcons made seemed less like cricket and more like ritual, as if they were weaving some unseen design through the game.

Draven Ashmoor returned to bowl, his grin wider now, his fingers trailing with black smoke that hissed when it touched the glowing pitch. He hurled the ball, and this

time it bent reality itself, splitting through the air with a screech as though the sky resisted its passage. Nyssa swung, the bat flaring with fire, but the ball vanished a heartbeat before contact and reappeared behind her, slamming into the stumps with a crack like breaking bone. The crowd gasped in shock, some booing, others confused, but the umpire hesitated, his staff raised uncertainly as if even he was unsure what he had just witnessed.

Nyssa's eyes blazed, literal flames sparking at her knuckles, but Aarion placed a hand on her shoulder before she could argue. "Stay calm," he murmured, though his own jaw tightened. The Falcons wanted them angry, reckless. This wasn't about runs or wickets. It was bait.

Kaelen strolled forward, his movements slow, deliberate, almost regal. He adjusted his black gloves, his smile cutting through the noise like a blade. "Stronger than the stories said," he called toward Aarion, his voice carrying unnaturally clear despite the distance. "But strength is useless without understanding." His team circled behind him, their presence more like hunters than players, each step weaving the shadows around them tighter.

Thalen Brightforge shouted encouragement, rallying the Lecars, but Aarion barely heard him. His eyes were on Kaelen, on the way the rival captain's fingers brushed the ball as though it were more than leather and stitches.

And then he saw it: faint marks etched into the surface, runes too dark to belong to any sanctioned essence. The realization struck hard,this was no ordinary cricket ball. It had been turned into a vessel, a conduit for forbidden magic.

The next delivery confirmed it. Morwen bowled, her shadowy veil flaring, and the ball exploded into tendrils of darkness that lashed outward like whips, forcing Elira to leap aside or be caught in their grasp. The tendrils struck the pitch, burning scars into the runes that powered the Oval. Gasps rippled through the stands as the lanterns above flickered, dimming for the first time in centuries.

The umpire barked another warning, his staff glowing, but Kaelen only raised a hand, calm and unshaken. “This is just the beginning,” he said softly, though Aarion heard it as clearly as if he stood beside him.

Aarion’s chest tightened. His gloves glowed faintly again, light fighting against the creeping shadows. He didn’t know why his hands reacted this way, or what it meant, but he could no longer deny it,something deeper was at play. The Falcons weren’t here to win. They were here to test, to provoke, perhaps to awaken.

And as the ball whistled once more through the darkness, Aarion knew one truth beyond doubt. The match was no longer just a game.

The night above Luminaria Oval glimmered with enchanted lanterns, but their steady glow seemed uneasy now, as if even the magic that lit the stadium had sensed something unnatural. The chants of thousands rang out, banners shimmered with spells of light, yet beneath the noise an undercurrent of dread threaded itself through the air. Aarion felt it in his bones. Every breath he drew was heavy, charged with tension. This was no longer sport; it was theatre, ritual, perhaps even war disguised as a game.

Draven Ashmoor prowled back to his mark, rolling the ball between his palms. It pulsed faintly, veins of red light crawling across the leather like living fire trapped beneath its surface. His grin was wolfish, daring, cruel. The run-up was silent except for the hiss of smoke trailing behind his feet. He hurled the ball forward,its scream tore through the pitch like steel rending stone. The very air split around it. Nyssa braced, her bat igniting with a cascade of fire, but the moment her swing connected the ball blinked out of existence. A heartbeat later it reappeared behind her and smashed the stumps apart in a shower of sparks.

The Oval gasped in one voice, a sound like the collapse of mountains. Some in the stands cheered wildly,Falcons' banners flared black and red,but others booed, the cry of "Foul play!" rising in angry waves. The umpire's staff hammered the ground, runes of order flashing up the pitch, but even he hesitated, his eyes

narrowed with doubt. How did one call what should have been impossible?

Nyssa spun, fury blazing in her hands, a swirl of fire threatening to leap free. Aarion caught her arm before the flames could erupt. “Not here,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “They want you angry. Don’t give it to them.” His own pulse raced, his gloves still glowing faintly as though alive.

Kaelen Duskbane took two steps onto the field. He didn’t rush. He didn’t need to. His slow, deliberate pace cut through the noise more sharply than any shout. The rival captain adjusted his black gloves, each motion precise, controlled. “Better than the stories,” he said, voice unnaturally clear across the pitch. “But you fight blind, Lecar. And blind men lose.” His smirk widened, the Falcon supporters howling at his words, but Aarion heard something else beneath them: certainty, as though Kaelen wasn’t threatening him but describing an inevitability already written.

The game pressed on. Thalen Brightforge, ever the powerhouse, stepped up next. He swung with sheer force, his bat glowing like molten iron, smashing the ball high into the air. The crowd leapt to its feet as the ball soared, leaving a fiery tail across the sky, only to freeze in mid-flight. The flames guttered out. Gasps filled the Oval as the ball hung suspended above the field, twisting unnaturally before plummeting straight down into Veyra

Nocturne's waiting gloves. She caught it with casual ease, raised a mocking bow, and tossed it aside like a toy.

"She cheats with shadows," Elira Windfern muttered angrily beside Aarion, "but they still applaud her." Her wind magic bristled at her fingertips, eager for release. Aarion silenced her with a look. His chest tightened. The rules of cricket were being twisted, bent, weaponized,and the officials were powerless to stop it. The Falcons weren't playing to win. They were playing to break the balance of the Oval itself.

Morwen Nightshade's turn came. Her presence was heavier than before, shadows lapping at her ankles like waves of ink. She whispered, lips moving in rhythms older than the game, and bowled. The ball crawled across the pitch at first, deceptively slow, then split,two, three, five copies, all spinning with impossible speed. The crowd gasped, children cried out in fear, banners flickered. Aarion's heart hammered, but his gloves pulsed bright, a sharp warmth guiding him. Instinct cut through the chaos: third from the left. He lunged without hesitation. The ball struck his gloves with a weight far heavier than leather and seam should have carried, and the false shadows burst into black smoke that curled upward like dying serpents.

The stadium exploded in sound, Lecar supporters roaring his name, stamping their feet so hard the Oval trembled. Aarion lifted the ball high, defiance burning in his eyes.

Yet pride quickly soured. That ball had not been mere trickery,it had carried essence, raw and forbidden, woven into its stitching. These weren't illusions for spectacle. They were instruments. Conduits. Weapons.

From the boundary Kaelen clapped, slow, deliberate, each strike of his hands cutting louder than the crowd's frenzy. "You see it too," he whispered, his voice somehow threading through the din directly to Aarion. "Good. Then perhaps you understand why this game matters."

Aarion froze. The words were not taunts but recognition. Kaelen wasn't mocking him; he was measuring him. Testing him.

His gloves throbbed again, faint light pushing back against the creeping darkness that lingered from the Falcon's spell. He didn't understand their power, not yet, but they were reacting, awakening. And Kaelen knew it.

The scoreboard glittered with numbers, showing Lumeria Lecars still ahead. Thalen cracked another six, Elira curved a delivery past a Falcon's bat, the crowd roared their approval. But Aarion could not join the celebration. His eyes locked on Kaelen, his gut cold with realization.

The Shadow Falcons weren't here for victory. They weren't here for glory. They were here for something hidden, something buried within the very essence of the

Oval itself. And every delivery, every spell, every shadow-wrought trick was a step closer to awakening it.

The gloves on Aarion's hands pulsed one more time, bright enough for him alone to see. His breath caught, his mind racing. He whispered beneath the roar, almost in prayer, almost in warning: "This match is not a game."

The scoreboard glittered defiantly, announcing the Lecars still in the lead, but no one in the crowd cared for numbers anymore. The air in Luminaria Oval had changed,dense, humming with unnatural energy. Lanterns above flickered, their glow faltering as though the very magic that sustained the stadium recoiled from what was happening on the field.

Kaelen Duskbane stepped forward at last, calm as a predator who knew the hunt had already been won. His black gloves shimmered faintly, threads of crimson energy crawling between his fingers. The crowd silenced, unease sweeping through every tier of the Oval. Even the umpire clutched his staff tighter, runes flashing like warning beacons.

"Final ball," Kaelen murmured, though his voice carried to Aarion as if whispered directly into his mind. "Let us see what you are truly made of."

He drew his hand back, the ball cradled against his palm. Aarion's breath hitched. He saw the runes etched into its surface glow, not red this time but deep violet, the color

of forbidden essence. The pitch itself shuddered, cracks spidering across the runes carved into its surface. With a motion too smooth to be mortal, Kaelen released.

The ball didn't simply fly,it screamed, ripping through the air like a comet. Shadows swirled around it, a vortex forming mid-flight, tearing banners from the stands, rattling the enchanted wards of the Oval. The crowd erupted into chaos, voices rising in fear. Children cried out as the lanterns above snuffed to black one by one.

Aarion didn't think. His gloves burned white-hot, searing against his skin. Instinct,not training, not skill, but something deeper, ancient,took over. He leapt forward, his hands rising as though pulled by unseen strings. The ball slammed into his gloves with earth-shaking force, a blinding clash of light against shadow. For a heartbeat the entire Oval vanished into brilliance.

And then came the sound.

A crack,not of leather, not of wood, but of stone. The ground beneath Aarion splintered, the runes of the Oval fracturing in a jagged ring around the pitch. Shadows surged upward like smoke from a broken seal, curling toward the night sky. The roar of the crowd faded into horrified silence.

When Aarion looked up, still clutching the ball, he saw Kaelen watching him, eyes alight not with anger but

satisfaction. The rival captain inclined his head, a smile sharp as a blade. “You opened it,” he whispered.

Before Aarion could speak, the crack widened, light and shadow spiraling upward from the heart of the Oval. The stadium trembled. The banners shredded. The lanterns died. And from beneath the field, something stirred.

The match was over.

The real game had just begun.

– CHAPTER FIVE–

The Archmage's Warning

The Oval did not sound like a stadium anymore; it sounded like a battlefield. The echoes of cheers that had filled the air an hour ago were replaced by the cracking groan of stone splitting beneath its own weight. Where cricket chants had once roared, there was only the rumble of panic and the quick stampede of fleeing feet. The wards that bound the arena's structure together flickered like dying stars, their protective runes broken and bleeding light. Spectators screamed as they stumbled toward the exits, the silver banners of Lumeria fluttering violently in the disturbed air, ash clinging to their once-proud cloth. From the cracked terraces to the trembling pillars, the Oval looked less like the crown jewel of the kingdom and more like the husk of something ancient, something that should have stayed buried.

Amidst the chaos, one figure didn't move. Aarion Veylan stood near the fractured pitch, his boots inches away from a jagged crack that still pulsed faintly with red glow. His breath came in short bursts, but he couldn't

tear his eyes from the fissures. The gloves on his hands,once only his prized equipment,were still glowing with faint white light. The leather shimmered as if alive, threads of ancient fire stitched into their seams. Heat seeped into his palms, steady and insistent, like a heartbeat that was not his own. He flexed his fingers, and the light brightened. The more he stared, the less the gloves looked like sporting gear and the more they felt like watchers,old eyes, silent voices pressing against his skin, whispering through the glow. The earth beneath him shuddered again, dust falling from the shattered canopy above, catching in his hair. He didn't flinch. The crowd's screams and the guards' shouts reached him only dimly, like echoes in a dream. What echoed loudest was a single thought hammering against his mind: This wasn't just a game. It was never just a game.

Nyssa pushed through the scattering players and guardians, her braid disheveled, eyes sharp with worry. She found Aarion standing dangerously close to the fissures. "Aarion!" she shouted over the chaos. Her voice cracked slightly,not from fear of the crowd, but fear of him. He didn't look up. Nyssa grabbed his shoulder and shook him. "The stands are collapsing! We have to get out!" The gloves pulsed in response, heat licking her hand where it touched the leather. She yanked it back with a hiss. "By the Saints,your hands are burning!" Only then did Aarion finally turn. His eyes were glazed, pupils reflecting the faint glow from the cracks. "It reacted," he whispered. "The ground… and these…"

Nyssa’s expression shifted from fear to something darker. “What do you mean?”

Before Aarion could answer, another voice cut through the chaos. “Elira, over here!”

Elira Starcrest,scholar, strategist, and ever the voice of reason,ran toward them, her robes dragging ash behind her. Unlike the others, her face wasn’t twisted in panic. It was pale, yes, but focused, her gaze darting between the cracks and the gloves. “What happened here?” she demanded, scanning Aarion from head to toe. Nyssa gestured wildly at his hands. “Look at his gloves,” “I see them,” Elira said sharply. Her eyes narrowed. “That isn't a natural flame. And those fissures… they aren’t spreading randomly. They look like,”

Her words were swallowed by a sudden silence. The Oval stilled. Not entirely,guards still moved, dust still fell,but the sound of collapse seemed to fade. The screams outside were muffled. The tremors lessened. Aarion looked up sharply. The hairs on his arms rose. Something,someone,had entered.

It wasn't a spectacle. No lightning from the sky, no thundering trumpets. Just a shift in air, a quiet that spread outward like ripples on water. The fractured wards along the Oval’s boundaries steadied. The cracks dimmed, as if bowing under an unseen command. Nyssa exhaled

shakily. “What in all hells…” Elira’s face went paler still. “No. Not him.”

A tall figure was walking across the ruined ground. His silver hair glimmered in the broken lantern-light, untouched by ash. In his right hand, a staff of crystal and silver metal pulsed with gentle radiance,soft, steady, eternal. The whispers began at once. Those who hadn’t fled froze where they stood.

“The Archmage…”

“Seraphius Deymar…”

The name carried through the stadium like a prayer and a warning in one. Aarion’s breath caught. His heart hammered harder than it had during the match itself. He had seen great players, he had seen captains, even met commanders of Lumeria’s guard. But this was different. Seraphius didn’t need to command attention. His presence bent the world around him. The broken Oval, the bleeding runes, the chaos,they obeyed him simply by existing near him. And now his silver-blue gaze was fixed solely on Aarion Veylan.

Seraphius Deymar did not stride like a conqueror, nor did he hurry like a man summoned to danger. His steps were deliberate, measured, yet each one seemed to reshape the Oval itself. The runes along the pillars steadied with every motion, as if the world feared to crumble in his presence. The tremors that had threatened

to split the ground apart faded into silence, the cracks glowing softer, dimmer, as though ashamed of their own existence before him.

People who moments ago had been screaming now stared, stunned into stillness. A mother clutched her child near the broken stands, her tears drying on her face as she whispered his name under her breath. Guards lowered their weapons, not in surrender but in reverence. Even the faint wind that stirred the ash seemed to slow, curling gently as if unwilling to disturb his path.

Nyssa's hand tightened around Aarion's arm. Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper. "He's here… the Archmage."

Elira, even the composed one, seemed almost rattled. She dipped her head slightly, her lips moving in an unspoken phrase,part prayer, part disbelief. "He hasn't walked these grounds in decades," she murmured. "If he's here now…" Her words trailed into a silence more telling than a scream.

Aarion, however, felt none of the comfort the crowd seemed to draw from Seraphius's presence. His heartbeat quickened, not from awe, but from the crushing weight of eyes that now seemed to see only him. The Archmage had not glanced at the guards, nor the terrified spectators, nor the shattered Oval itself. His gaze, steady

and piercing, locked on Aarion from the moment he appeared and had not shifted once.

A strange heaviness pressed against Aarion's chest. It was not magic,not entirely. It was an expectation. As though centuries of history, unspoken and buried, had all chosen this one moment to lean upon his shoulders.

The gloves flared in response, their white glow intensifying, forcing Aarion to clench his fists. He could feel it,the strange pulse thrumming from the leather, syncing with the rhythm of his own heartbeat until he could no longer tell where his pulse ended and the relics' began.

Seraphius paused only a few paces away. The lanterns hanging from the broken archways above flickered, yet the staff in his hand glowed with unwavering constancy. Its crystal core pulsed faintly, not bright enough to dazzle, but steady enough to command.

And when he finally spoke, the silence deepened even further. His voice was not loud, but it carried, threading through the Oval, curling into every ear, filling every silence with clarity.

"Do you know why they burned tonight?"

The question struck Aarion harder than any blow. For a moment, he could not move, could not think. He parted his lips, searching for an answer, but the words caught.

Denial trembled on his tongue, yet something deeper,an instinct,stopped him from speaking too quickly.

Seraphius's head tilted slightly, his silver-blue eyes narrowing, not in anger but in quiet expectation. The faint smile that touched his lips was one of mystery, of knowledge carefully withheld. "You think they are your tools. Your equipment. An advantage in a game. But they are more than that, young Veylan. They are relics, once forged not for sport, but for survival. They remember fire that fell from the heavens when crimson ruled the sky."

The fissures beneath the pitch gave a faint answering glow, as though stirred by the Archmage's words. Nyssa gasped, clutching Aarion's arm tighter. Elira's eyes widened, shock breaking through her usual composure.

Aarion, meanwhile, felt his legs weaken. The words seemed to sink into his very bones. Relics? Crimson sky? None of this was meant for him,he was a player, a boy, a fighter of games, not wars. Yet the gloves burned brighter, as if mocking his attempt to deny.

Seraphius took a step closer. "You ask why the ground split. Why your hands seared. It is because the world itself remembers, even if men do not. Tonight was not a match. Tonight was a warning."

Aarion swallowed hard. His mouth felt dry, though the air was heavy with the scent of smoke and scorched

stone. The Archmage's words lingered like embers in his ears, each syllable fusing with the dull roar of his pulse.

He wanted to protest, to tell Seraphius that he was wrong, that these gloves were nothing more than a gift from the academy smiths, tokens of honor for rising players. But as he glanced down at the pale flames lacing the seams, he knew he would be lying to himself. They looked nothing like the crafted leather he had once admired in the locker room. Every stitch seemed alive, every flare of light older than memory.

The ground quivered again, though faintly this time, as though acknowledging Seraphius's presence. The fissures closest to Aarion glowed in sympathy with the gloves, like veins connecting the boy to the land beneath his feet.

Whispers rolled across the survivors still scattered around the Oval. They were soft, fearful, and reverent. The Archmage… what is he saying… relics… Crimson Sky… Some knelt without knowing why, while others pressed hands to their foreheads, as if shielding themselves from a truth they could not bear to face.

Nyssa's face hardened, but Aarion could feel the tremor in her grip. "Relics forged for survival?" she repeated, almost to herself. "Survival from what?"

Elira stepped forward, her voice carefully measured though her eyes betrayed the storm inside her.

“Archmage Seraphius, are you implying these fissures are linked to the Crimson Sky? That ancient legend is only a tale,”

“Legends are truths too heavy for men to carry,” Seraphius interrupted softly, his gaze still locked on Aarion. “They bury them in stories, so children may dream while the earth remembers the nightmares.”

Elira’s lips parted in quiet disbelief. Her scholar’s mind, sharp and unyielding, faltered under the weight of words that bent history itself.

Aarion wanted to step back, to distance himself from that gaze, but the gloves pulled him forward instead. Every nerve in his arms felt stretched, vibrating, as though the relics were straining to respond. His head throbbed with flashes,red skies, shadows rising like smoke, towers crumbling into seas of fire. Images so vivid he stumbled, catching himself only because Nyssa pulled him upright with a sharp tug.

“Aarion!” she hissed. “What’s happening to you?”

He blinked rapidly, fighting the visions. “I don’t… I don’t know. It’s showing me things.”

Seraphius lifted his staff slightly, its Everlight crystal humming in response. The glow washed over Aarion, and for a brief moment, the visions dulled, retreating like waves from a shore. “Do not resist them,” the Archmage

said. “The gloves do not lie. They carry memories. Memory men like me have long studied but can no longer summon. And now, they have chosen you.”

The weight of the statement nearly crushed Aarion. Chosen. Him. He wanted to scream that he never asked for it, that he never wanted anything but the thrill of a match, the roar of a crowd, the honor of his team. Yet the way the earth had split, the way his hands still burned, told him no amount of denial could strip him of what was already bound.

Around them, the stadium was eerily calm. Dust hung suspended in faint golden shafts of light breaking through the broken arches. The silence was unnatural, a silence that seemed crafted, as though the Oval itself dared not intrude upon this exchange.

Nyssa shook her head, muttering under her breath, “This isn’t real… this can’t be real.”

Seraphius finally allowed his gaze to flick toward her. His expression was neither stern nor kind, but weighed. “You, thief of the Moonveil, know well that the world is built upon hidden layers. You see cracks in walls no one else sees. Would you deny the crack beneath your very feet?”

Nyssa froze, her mouth falling open in shock. He knew her name. He knew her title. Secrets she had never spoken aloud in this city. For once, the sharp-witted

rogue was silent, her confidence shattered by the calm authority of a man who seemed to know every soul more intimately than they knew themselves.

Aarion's knees threatened to give way. He clenched his fists again, the gloves searing against his skin, whispering in that strange language he could almost,but not fully,understand. Fragments of words pressed at the edge of his mind. Guard… Sky… Flame…

Seraphius lowered his staff, planting it against the cracked earth. The glow from the fissures dimmed further, retreating into silence, but Aarion's hands continued to burn. "You stand at a threshold," the Archmage said, his voice echoing softly through the ruined arena. "And thresholds are not doors one can step back through. Tonight was not chaos born of rivalry. The Shadow Falcons are not mere opponents. They are a shadow of something older, darker, clawing its way back through the cracks of this land. And you, Aarion Veylan…" His eyes sharpened like blades of silver. "…you are the one they stirred awake."

The words landed heavier than stone. Aarion felt the Oval tilt beneath him, though the ground did not move. A game had ended, yes, but something far larger had begun, and the weight of it pressed on his chest until his breath came shallow.

Aarion staggered, his vision swimming, the fissures below him glowing brighter as if feeding off his disorientation. He tried to blink away the dizziness, but instead of the ruined Oval, another world began to superimpose itself upon his sight.

The first thing he saw was the sky. Not blue, not clouded, not like anything mortal eyes should have seen. It was crimson,an endless ocean of fire that seemed alive, churning and twisting as though hungry. Lightning not of silver but of black carved through the heavens, splitting clouds that bled sparks instead of rain. He felt heat on his skin, yet it was not the warmth of the sun; it was suffocating, crushing, like being pressed under the weight of a burning ocean.

Below the crimson heavens, he saw a city. Lumeria,but not the Lumeria he knew. Towers of white stone stood proud, their banners rippling with gold, but shadows crawled across their surfaces like veins spreading through glass. The people below ran in chaos, their screams echoing like those he had just heard in the Oval. But these screams were older, carrying centuries of despair.

In the distance, something vast moved. A shape that blotted the crimson horizon, wings unfurling wide enough to eclipse the burning clouds. A dragon, but not like Morvash the Flame Wyrm he had heard in stories. This one was darker, its scales glinting not with fire but

with something emptier, something that devoured light rather than reflected it. Its roar shook the very ground, splitting mountains, turning rivers to steam.

And then, from the shadows of that sky, figures emerged. Warriors cloaked in darkness, their eyes glowing with unnatural flame. He could not count them,dozens, hundreds, thousands. Their blades shone with runes he did not understand, yet somehow, instinct told him they were not forged to fight men, but to unmake them. They moved like a tide, swarming the city, leaving only ruin in their wake.

Aarion gasped, clutching his head, but the vision would not release him. He saw a figure rise from the heart of the storm,a man, or perhaps something that had once been a man. His armor was blackened steel, his crown forged from shattered fragments of something ancient. In his hand, a sword that burned with crimson flame. And when his face turned toward Aarion, even across the veil of time, Aarion felt his blood turn to ice. Those eyes were endless void, yet within them burned recognition.

The voice came, deep and echoing, vibrating not through air but through Aarion's bones. You will burn with the rest. Chosen or not, flame is only the beginning.

Aarion screamed, falling to his knees, the sound tearing from his throat raw and unrestrained. Nyssa dropped beside him instantly, gripping his shoulders. "Aarion!

Aarion, look at me! What do you see?" Her voice sounded distant, muffled, as though he were trapped underwater.

The vision shifted. He now stood amidst ashes. The Oval was gone. The world was gone. Only fire remained, consuming the ruins of everything he had known. And in the center of it all,his gloves. They floated in the air, glowing brighter, brighter, until their white light pierced through the crimson storm like a spear.

Seraphius's voice cut through, calm yet commanding, anchoring him back. "Do not fear what you see. The relics show you truth, not prophecy. Truth buried in the earth beneath us, in the ashes of what once was. They remember because we chose to forget."

Aarion gasped as the vision fractured, shards of crimson light shattering before his eyes, replaced once more by the trembling Oval. He collapsed forward, his palms striking the cracked earth, the gloves still pulsing but weaker now, exhausted as if they too had fought a battle.

Nyssa lifted him partially, her face pale with fear. "What did you see? Tell me you're all right,"

But Aarion could not answer. His chest heaved with ragged breaths, his mind still trapped between the dying echoes of a crimson sky and the cold weight of Seraphius's words.

The Archmage stepped closer, planting the Everlight staff firmly against the ground. Its glow spread outward like a tide of calm, steadying the trembling earth. His gaze did not waver from Aarion. “Now you understand why I am here.” His voice was quiet, but it carried through the ruins as though the world itself leaned in to listen. “This is no longer about games. No longer about rivalries. What you carry on your hands is older than kingdoms, older than thrones. It is memory forged into flame. And it has chosen you.”

The gloves pulsed one last time, as if agreeing with him.

Aarion staggered upright, still trembling from the vision, his breath misting though the night was warm. Sweat dampened his temples, and every nerve in his body hummed as though lightning had crawled through his veins. The gloves continued their faint glow, whispering heat into his skin, but to Aarion it felt less like fire and more like memory,unwanted, unending.

Nyssa steadied him, her grip tight, eyes blazing with fear disguised as anger. “That wasn’t normal, Aarion. I saw your eyes,they went white. You nearly collapsed. Tell me what you saw.”

He tried to speak, but his throat clenched around the words. The images,crimson skies, the dragon, the crowned figure with eyes like void,still seared

themselves behind his eyelids. He shook his head, unable to form sentences.

Elira stepped closer, voice low but cutting. “Archmage Seraphius,” she said, “if these relics can show such visions, then what does that mean? Why Aarion? There are hundreds of players, thousands of warriors. Why him?”

Seraphius’s gaze did not leave Aarion, but his words were for them all. “Because relics choose. They do not bend to skill, nor bloodline, nor ambition. They awaken when the world begins to fracture. And they have no patience for chance.”

Nyssa frowned, defiant even through her unease. “That’s not an answer. You speak in riddles while he nearly burns alive in front of us.”

The Archmage finally looked at her. His expression was not unkind, but heavy, as though each word he carried had centuries of weight. “Would you prefer a simpler answer, thief? Very well: the boy you cling to may hold the thread of our survival,or the key to our ruin. Which one, even I cannot say. That is why I am here.”

The Oval shuddered faintly, a reminder that the earth itself had not forgotten the fissures beneath. The crowd, held at bay by trembling guards, muttered louder now. Snatches of fear drifted through the smoke. The gloves

burned… Did you see the cracks follow him… Is he cursed…?

Aarion heard them all, each whisper cutting sharper than the last. He had trained for years to hear his name spoken with pride, shouted from stands, celebrated as the rising flame of Lumeria. Now it spread like poison, muttered with suspicion, dripping with dread. Cursed. Marked. Dangerous. His stomach twisted, and for the first time since the match began, he wished he could tear the gloves from his hands and fling them into the abyss. But even the thought made the relics flare hotter, binding themselves to his skin with stubborn will.

Elira noticed, her keen eyes narrowing. “They won’t let go,” she murmured, half to herself. “They’ve claimed him.”

Aarion turned sharply, his voice raw. “I didn’t ask for this! I don’t want any of this! I came here to play, not,” His words broke off as another tremor rolled through the Oval. Dust cascaded from the upper arches, but this time, the fissures pulsed in rhythm with his voice, as though echoing his defiance. The gloves flared brighter.

The Archmage’s eyes gleamed faintly, not with surprise but with grim recognition. “Do you see now? Even denial carries power when the relics stir. You think you are unprepared, boy, but you were never asked if you were ready.”

Nyssa drew Aarion closer, shielding him instinctively, though against what she wasn't sure. "Then stop circling us with riddles, old man. Tell us plainly,what are these gloves? Why him? And what in all Saints' names is the Crimson Sky?"

For a long moment, Seraphius said nothing. He simply studied the boy kneeling before him, hands wrapped in ancient flame. His silence was heavier than any answer, pulling even the whispers of the crowd into stillness. Then, at last, he spoke, his words slow and deliberate, each syllable etching itself into memory.

"The Crimson Sky was not a myth. It was not a story for children. It was the end of an age, when fire rained and shadows rose, when kingdoms crumbled and the earth bled light. Men forged weapons to withstand it,relics such as those you now bear. They were made not to win games, but to keep the world itself from burning."

The words fell like hammers. Elira staggered back, her face pale, whispering, "Saints preserve us…" Nyssa tightened her grip on Aarion, but she could not mask the shiver that ran through her.

And Aarion himself,he felt the Oval tilt beneath him again, though this time it was not vision but realization. Everything he thought he knew,his life, his matches, his dreams,shattered under the weight of those words.

The Archmage lowered his staff slightly, the Everlight crystal dimming to a gentle glow. “This is why I came,” he said softly. “Not to protect the Oval. Not to steady the wards. But to warn the one who has been chosen. From this night forward, nothing in your life will remain, only a game.”

The gloves pulsed one final time, as if sealing his words into Aarion’s very flesh.

The Oval had steadied under Seraphius’s presence, but the silence did not hold for long. Whispers swelled into voices, voices into shouts. The crowd pressed against the half-broken barriers, guards struggling to keep them back.

“He cursed the ground!” one man shouted, pointing toward Aarion.

“No, the Archmage came for him,that means he’s chosen!” another yelled, awe mingling with fear.

A woman clutched her child, pulling him away. “Chosen or cursed, it makes no difference. Nothing good comes of glowing cracks and burning gloves.”

The guards’ faces betrayed hesitation. Their duty was to protect the Oval, but their eyes lingered on Aarion with suspicion. A few shifted their stances, hands tightening on spears, as though bracing for orders to arrest him.

Nyssa noticed and immediately stepped in front of Aarion, daggers half drawn though she knew she stood no chance against a line of soldiers. Her voice rang sharp with defiance. “Touch him and you’ll regret it.”

Elira joined her, though her approach was steadier, colder. “You would dare point weapons at the boy under the Archmage’s eye? If you believe him to be dangerous, then so too do you accuse Seraphius of error.”

The words struck like a blade. The guards faltered, eyes flicking toward the Archmage for guidance.

Seraphius did not raise his voice, but the mere act of him turning his head silenced both the crowd and soldiers alike. His silver hair caught the faint glow of the Everlight staff as he spoke, calm and measured. “He is neither your enemy nor your savior,yet. Do not mistake fear for wisdom. Let him be.”

The guards lowered their spears at once. The crowd murmured uneasily, but none dared challenge the Archmage.

Aarion, still on his knees, lifted his eyes toward Seraphius, his voice hoarse. “You said these gloves remember. What do they remember? What am I supposed to do with memories that aren’t mine?”

For a fleeting moment, Seraphius’s expression softened, though his eyes remained sharp with ancient knowledge.

“You ask as though memory is passive. It is not. Memory shapes. It binds. These relics were forged to guard against what men feared most, and in doing so, they absorbed the very essence of that fear. They do not merely remember,they speak. They whisper warnings in flame and fracture.”

Aarion looked at his hands, the faint glow pulsing like a second heartbeat. In the silence between breaths, he thought he could hear it: not words exactly, but a rhythm, a cadence that wanted to form into language. It was maddeningly close, yet forever just beyond comprehension.

He clenched his fists, frustration bleeding into his tone. “I don’t understand any of it. Why me? I’m not a warrior. I’m not… whatever you think I am. I’m just a player.”

“Just a player,” Seraphius repeated quietly, as though tasting the words. He inclined his head slightly, his gaze piercing. “Tell me, Aarion Veylan,when the ground split beneath your feet, when the Crimson Sky bled through your vision, when the relics blazed white against darkness,did you feel like just a player?”

Aarion’s breath caught. His mind screamed to say yes, to cling to the only truth he had ever known. But deep inside, he remembered the weight of those visions, the dragon’s roar shaking his soul, the crowned figure’s gaze

burning into his bones. He remembered how the cracks had pulsed with his heartbeat, how the Oval itself had answered him. And he could not lie.

“No,” he whispered.

The Archmage’s faint smile returned, though it held no joy. “Then you already know the answer.”

Nyssa knelt beside him, her hand gripping his shoulder fiercely. “You don’t have to listen to him. You don’t have to accept this. You’re still you, Aarion. No prophecy, no relic can take that from you.”

Elira, however, folded her arms, eyes narrowed. “And yet if he refuses, what then? Do the cracks stop spreading? Does the memory of the Crimson Sky fade back into the ground? You saw what happened tonight. Denial will not unmake it.”

The two women’s voices clashed like steel, one fighting to protect, the other to confront. Aarion stood caught between them, his mind tearing in two.

Seraphius raised his staff once more, its light cutting through their argument. “It is not choice that binds him,it is awakening. Deny it, and the world will still demand its due. Accept it, and perhaps you may guide the fire instead of being consumed by it.”

The Oval trembled again, as if to emphasize his words. The cracks glowed faintly, a reminder that the threat had not vanished but merely slept, waiting beneath the surface.

And in that glow, Aarion saw his reflection in the fractured ground,gloves burning, eyes uncertain, a boy standing on the edge of something vast and terrifying.

The tension within the Oval grew thicker than smoke. Every corner of the stands seethed with whispers, curses, and fearful prayers. Some pointed at Aarion as though he were a blight, others whispered blessings, believing they had witnessed a chosen one's awakening. Mothers held children back, old men spat in the dirt, and youths shouted wild theories that spread like wildfire.

One rumor, loudest among them, carried across the broken pitch: "He cracked the earth,he's the reason the Oval broke!" Another voice countered sharply: "No, the Archmage himself walked to him! Don't you see? He's blessed!" Yet another hissed from the crowd: "Blessed or cursed, both bring ruin."

The guards stiffened, caught between orders and instinct. One captain raised his hand hesitantly, muttering, "Archmage or no Archmage, we can't ignore this. He's dangerous." Spears angled downward, iron tips catching the glow of the fissures.

Nyssa instantly stepped forward, daggers glinting in her fists. “Try it. Just try laying a hand on him.” Her voice shook, not from fear but from the reckless courage that came whenever someone she cared about was threatened.

The captain sneered faintly, emboldened by numbers. “Step aside, thief. This doesn’t concern you.”

Nyssa’s reply was a hiss: “Everything concerns me when it concerns him.”

Elira’s voice sliced through the standoff, cool and razor-sharp. “Think carefully. If you raise steel against him now, you’re not just defying the boy. You’re defying the Archmage.”

The guards faltered. Their eyes shifted toward Seraphius. He had not moved, had not spoken, yet his very presence made hesitation fester in their resolve.

Finally, the Archmage raised his staff, planting it with a subtle motion. A ripple of energy spread outward, extinguishing the glow of the fissures for a heartbeat. The air itself hushed. “Lay down your arms,” he said, his voice low but unyielding. “You mistake fear for duty. Do not confuse the two again.”

The spears lowered instantly. The captain bowed, shame flaring in his eyes, before ordering his men to retreat.

The crowd's whispers dimmed into wary silence, though the suspicion in their eyes had not vanished.

Aarion watched it all with a hollow pit forming in his stomach. He had dreamed of crowds shouting his name, but not like this,not with doubt and dread lacing every syllable. His chest tightened. He wanted to rip the gloves from his hands, hurl them into the ground, and scream that he was no threat. But when he flexed his fingers, the relics pulsed in response, as if mocking the very thought.

Nyssa crouched beside him, whispering fiercely, "Don't listen to them. You're not what they say you are. You're you. Aarion."

Elira's gaze was unflinching, her arms crossed. "And yet, look at the ground. Look at the gloves. Can you deny the evidence of your own eyes? If you continue pretending this is nothing, you'll break faster than the Oval did."

Nyssa shot her a glare. "And what, you'd rather see him surrender to riddles and destiny? He doesn't owe this world his life."

Elira replied coldly, "We all owe the world our lives, thief. Some more than others."

Their voices clashed like steel, sharp and unrelenting. Aarion felt caught in the crossfire, pulled in two directions,Nyssa's desperate insistence that he cling to

himself, Elira's merciless logic demanding he face the truth.

Seraphius silenced them with a single glance. The Everlight staff pulsed once, its glow resonant like a heartbeat. His eyes found Aarion again, unblinking.

"You asked what they remember," he said. "The relics are not lifeless artifacts. They are echoes. When the Crimson Sky tore across this world, the gloves you wear were forged to resist its fire. Every moment of that war, every scream, every battle,they absorbed it. They do not rest. They replay. They remember. And those memories live in you now."

Aarion's breath shuddered. He thought again of the visions,the burning city, the dragon, the crowned figure with eyes of void. His voice cracked. "I saw it. I saw… everything. The sky was red, the city burning. There were shadows everywhere. And there was someone." His throat tightened. "He looked at me. As if he knew me."

The Archmage inclined his head slowly. "Yes. That is their language. You will not hear it in words, but in visions, in flame, in fracture. The relics speak through memory, and you must learn to listen."

Aarion shook his head violently, the weight pressing down on him unbearable. "I don't want to listen! I don't want their voices in my head. I don't want to be a part of

this. I just wanted to play!" His voice broke, raw and desperate. "Why me? Why not someone else?"

The gloves pulsed, heat flaring up his arms like fire under his skin. His denial fed them, and the fissures below responded, glowing faintly once more, a dangerous reminder that his refusal itself carried power.

Seraphius's gaze hardened, and for the first time, his tone cut sharp as steel. "Because relics do not ask. They awaken. And when they do, they do not care for your desires. They bind, they choose, and they test. If you deny them, they will still burn. If you ignore them, they will still remember. Better to listen, Aarion Veylan,better to guide fire than to be consumed by it."

The words fell like hammer blows. Nyssa gripped his shoulder tighter, whispering fiercely, "You don't have to accept this." Elira's quiet voice overlapped, firm and steady: "You already have."

The Oval trembled faintly again, as though echoing the inevitability of the Archmage's words. Aarion stared at his reflection in the fractured ground,gloves glowing, eyes wild, a boy teetering on the edge of something he could not escape.

And in his chest, buried deep beneath fear and denial, a single, treacherous thought flickered like a spark: What if this is who I was meant to be all along?

The glow from the gloves suddenly spiked, brighter than torches, searing white with streaks of red. Aarion gasped and fell forward on his hands, the ground beneath him crackling with sparks. The fissures pulsed once more,this time not faintly, but violently, as if awakened again.

Seraphius's head snapped up. "Not now…" he muttered, staff striking the ground. Rings of stabilizing wards rippled outward, but the relics resisted, fighting against the Archmage's authority.

Aarion cried out, his vision blurring. Heat engulfed him, but it wasn't the Oval,it was somewhere else, somewhere far older. The crowd's noise faded into a deafening silence, replaced by the roar of fire and the clash of steel.

Suddenly he stood in a battlefield.

The sky was blood-red, the earth broken. Giants of flame battled armored knights, their blades shattering under the weight of heat. Dragons wheeled overhead, their roars shaking the heavens, while rivers of molten rock cut through the land. Shadows swarmed across the battlefield,creatures not of flesh but of void, clawing through men and elves alike.

A voice echoed through the smoke. "Hold the line! The relics must not fall!" Aarion turned and saw warriors wielding weapons that glowed with the same furious light as his gloves. Axes, blades, shields,all burning white, all resisting the storm.

Then his eyes caught one figure.

Atop a black horse, draped in crimson banners, rode the crowned man with void eyes. His gaze pierced through the battlefield, through time itself, locking onto Aarion. His lips curved into a cold smile. “So. You return.”

The vision convulsed. Aarion screamed, clutching his head as pain lanced through him.

Back in the Oval, Nyssa shook him desperately. “Aarion! Wake up! Please, wake up!”

Elira stood frozen, her sharp tongue gone, her voice breaking. “Archmage,do something!”

Seraphius’s expression was grim. “It is not mine to stop. The relics are claiming their vessel.” He raised his staff higher, Everlight blazing, fighting to cage the power. The fissures resisted, fire licking from their edges.

The crowd erupted. “He’s summoning fire!” “It’s the Crimson Sky again!” Guards braced, torn between rushing in or fleeing. Mothers dragged children from the stands, priests began chanting hurried prayers. The Oval became chaos, yet at its center all that existed was a boy on his knees, burning with memory not his own.

Inside the vision, Aarion stumbled toward the crowned figure, choking on smoke. His own voice felt foreign as he shouted: “Who are you? Why do you know me?”

The man's laughter was thunder. "Names are for the living. I am what waits when memory ends. And now, boy… so are you."

With a snap, darkness swallowed everything.

Aarion collapsed back into the Oval, chest heaving, sweat pouring down his skin. The glow from the gloves dimmed to embers, though faint runes now crawled across their surface,marks that had not been there before, etched like scars of fire.

Nyssa caught him before he hit the ground, pulling him close, whispering fiercely, "I've got you. I've got you."

Elira stared at the new markings, horror in her eyes. "They've branded him. They've marked him as theirs."

Aarion's lips trembled as he gasped for breath. His voice was raw, barely a whisper. "He knew me. The man in the crown… he knew me."

Seraphius lowered his staff at last, the wards settling, though his eyes burned brighter than the Everlight itself. "Of course he did," he said softly, almost sorrowfully. "For memory recognizes memory. And the Crimson Crown does not forget."

The glow from Aarion's gloves faded to a simmer, yet the marks they had burned into his skin refused to

vanish. They pulsed like veins of molten metal, faintly alive, as if watching him from beneath the flesh.

The Oval reeked of fear. No cheer of victory, no clamor of celebration, only the tremor of terrified hearts. A hundred eyes bore down on Aarion,not with admiration, but with suspicion, dread, even hatred. The boy who once dreamed of glory now stood as the nightmare of their whispers.

A guard spat on the fractured ground. “He carries the Crimson taint.” His words slithered through the crowd, poisoning it. “Mark me, nothing good will come while that boy walks free.”

Nyssa rose, fury flaring in her eyes. She moved like a predator, dagger flashing toward the guard’s throat. “Say another word,”

Seraphius lifted his staff, and the dagger froze in her hand, trapped by invisible force. His voice, calm yet terrible, broke through the tension. “Do not waste steel on children of fear. Their tongues are sharp, but their courage ends at their teeth.”

The guard paled, lowering his head, silenced at once. Nyssa’s breath trembled, but she forced her dagger back into its sheath.

Elira had not spoken since the vision ended. Now, stepping closer to Aarion, she studied his arms with the

precision of a scholar. Her voice was hushed but edged with unease. “Those runes are not random. They’re a script,ancient binding glyphs. The gloves are not just remembering, they are rewriting him.”

Aarion jerked his arms back, his voice raw. “I’m not a scroll to be written on!” His words cracked, his body shivering. He hugged himself, as though to shield his skin from its own betrayal.

Seraphius’s gaze lingered on him, then turned toward the two girls. “Come.”

He guided them to the shadow of the ruined pavilion, a place just out of the crowd’s reach. The Oval still crackled faintly, but here the wards dampened the sound, cocooning them in a fragile silence.

Aarion stumbled after them, half in defiance, half in desperate need to know more. He pressed close enough to hear.

The Archmage spoke low, his tone carrying none of the cryptic flourishes from before,only blunt gravity. “This boy is not awakening by chance. Relics do not stir without cause. The last time they blazed, the Crimson Sky swallowed kingdoms. The crown he saw,the one who looked upon him,had no vision. That gaze means the breach has stirred again.”

Elira inhaled sharply, the blood draining from her face. "You mean,"

"Yes." Seraphius's voice tightened. "The Crimson Crown still remembers its enemies. And if it has recognized him…" He did not finish.

Nyssa snapped, voice breaking with anger. "Then you're saying he's cursed? That he's already doomed?"

"No," Seraphius replied softly. "I am saying that from this night forward, the choice is not whether he fights, but how. Fight blindly, and he will burn. Learn to listen, and perhaps he will live long enough to change what memory demands."

Aarion's hands clenched, nails digging into his palms. Every word felt like a chain tightening around his throat. His breath quickened, anger rising. He wanted to shout, to curse, to demand they stop speaking about him as though he wasn't there.

But when he opened his mouth, the gloves pulsed, and his voice came out ragged, unfamiliar. "They… they already know me."

All three turned to him. Nyssa's eyes filled with pain, Elira's with dread, and Seraphius's with a resigned sorrow.

The Archmage lowered his staff, his silhouette bathed in the fractured moonlight spilling across the Oval. “Then, Aarion Veylan,” he said quietly, “know this: the world remembers you, even if you do not remember it. And memory does not forgive.”

The words struck harder than any spear. Aarion staggered, his knees trembling beneath him. The crowd’s whispers were still out there, like a storm behind glass, but in this moment he heard nothing,nothing but the echo of Seraphius’s warning and the faint, ceaseless pulse of the gloves.

The Oval emptied in fragments of chaos,guards dragging people out, healers tending to the injured, priests muttering chants to soothe their frightened flock. But Aarion remained, even as Nyssa begged him to leave. He felt tethered to the ground, to the fractures glowing faintly beneath the soil, as though they called for him.

Seraphius lingered only long enough to steady the wards once more. His silver hair caught the lantern-light as he turned, his eyes briefly meeting Aarion’s. In that fleeting glance lay something unspoken,sorrow, warning, perhaps even apology. And then he was gone, vanishing like smoke carried off by the night.

Nyssa tugged on Aarion’s arm. “Come on. We can’t stay here. The whole city’s talking about you already.”

He nodded distantly, letting her and Elira guide him out. Yet his eyes never left the glowing fissures.

That night, long after the crowd dispersed and the Oval was abandoned, Aarion returned alone.

The sky above Lumeria was restless, clouds swirling as though echoing his turmoil. The cracked earth still pulsed faintly, whispering in silence. His boots scuffed against the rubble as he walked to the center, standing exactly where the gloves had first flared.

For a moment, the world was still.

Then the gloves stirred.

White fire flickered across his fingertips, unbidden. Aarion froze, breath quickening, but he did not pull away this time. Instead, he lowered his hand to the ground, letting the glowing cracks touch the relics.

A surge hit him.

The Oval vanished.

He stood in a cavern,vast, endless, carved not by nature but by battle. Black stone walls scorched with flame scars. Ancient banners torn, their emblems unrecognizable. And at the heart of it all, a great gate, taller than mountains, sealed with chains of fire. Each

link trembled as though it were straining to hold back something monstrous.

The gloves pulsed, their light matching the rhythm of the chains. Aarion staggered closer, drawn against his will. His ears rang with whispers, too many voices to count, all layered atop each other: screams of dying soldiers, chants of long-dead priests, the roars of dragons. The cacophony pressed into his skull until he thought it would split.

Then,silence.By dawn, Lumeria was alive with rumors. Every tavern, every market square, every cobblestone alley echoed with whispers of the Oval's calamity. Some swore the earth had split open because Aarion was cursed. Others claimed he bore the mark of the ancients, destined to save them all. But most spoke with fear: "If the boy cracked the Oval, what would he break next?" At the Raven's Rest tavern, merchants argued over steaming mugs of ale. One swore that Aarion was dangerous and must be cast out before worse happened. Another insisted he could be their only hope if he truly bore the fire of prophecy. A third spat at the floor, muttering that hope was just another word for fire before it burned you. The debate spread like wildfire across districts. Priests gathered in the temples, their prayers thick in the air. Children mimicked Aarion's glowing hands in alleyway games, laughing with a nervous edge. Thieves plotted to sell counterfeit "flame relics" to

gullible buyers. Fear and fascination twisted together, binding the city in tense uncertainty.

Far above the markets, in the marble halls of the royal keep, an emergency council had assembled. Queen Elendra Vaeloria sat on the high seat, her eyes calm yet edged with hidden power. King Roderic Greywing stood beside her, jaw tight as the chamber filled with frantic voices. Lord Branthor Eldane slammed his gauntleted fist on the table, declaring the boy a threat. He demanded permission to contain Aarion before worse disasters came. Princess Calistra Vorn cut through his thunder with a sharp voice, reminding him that Seraphius himself had appeared at the Oval. To dismiss that was folly, she argued, for the Archmage did not step onto the mortal field without reason. Branthor scoffed, muttering that the Archmage coddled children and had grown senile. His words nearly fractured the council further until the great doors opened. Seraphius Deymar entered, his silver hair gleaming faintly, Everlight Staff glowing in quiet resonance. His gaze swept across the chamber, and silence fell at once.

“You waste breath debating what the relics have already decided,” he said with quiet finality. “The boy is awakened. Whether you crown him or curse him, the world has already chosen.” The murmur that rippled across the council was uneasy. King Roderic pressed forward, demanding what course of action should be taken. Seraphius’s reply chilled even the bravest: “Pray

his flame learns to burn as shield, not sword. For if he fails… the chains beneath this kingdom will not hold." The chamber fell into a hush, save for the faint tapping of Queen Elendra's fingers on the throne. Her expression betrayed nothing but the glimmer in her eyes suggested she understood more than she allowed herself to speak aloud. "Then we prepare," she said softly. "We watch the skies, and we guard the cracks in the earth."

Meanwhile, in the healer's quarters, Aarion lay awake, staring at the ceiling beams. Sleep had refused him, every blink bringing back the crimson eye behind the chained gate, the laughter that had split his skull. Nyssa sat guard by the door, her daggers spread across her lap, her posture restless but protective. Elira perched on the windowsill, her gaze turned to the city below where fires of cooking hearths glowed like constellations. Aarion shifted at last, whispering into the silence. "They all hate me now."

Nyssa's head snapped up, her voice fierce and immediate. "Then let them. You don't need them. You've got us." Elira turned, her voice cooler, sharper. "He has more than us. He has a burden the world is already reshaping around him. Pretending otherwise won't shield him from it." Nyssa flared, her voice breaking with frustration. "Enough! He's still Aarion. Not your prophecy. Not your relic. Not your walking parchment of doom." Elira's eyes softened for just a

moment though her words cut just as deep. “And what if he is both?”

Aarion shut his eyes, breath trembling as their voices sank into him. His heart pounded with the weight of too many truths: the whispers of the city, the Archmage’s warning, the fissures glowing faintly beneath the Oval. Yet beneath it all, there was something else, a rhythm buried deep inside him. The gloves pulsed faintly against his skin, their warmth echoing the beat of his own heart, as though reminding him that destiny had already placed its claim.

In the quiet of that dawn, Aarion realized he was no longer just a boy with dreams of glory. He was something else entirely, something the world both needed and feared. And as the first light of morning spilled through the window, the air itself seemed to hold its breath, waiting for what would come next.

The chains rattled. Slowly, horribly, an eye opened in the darkness behind the gate. Crimson. Ancient. Patient. And it looked straight at him.

A familiar vessel, the voice rumbled, echoing from everywhere and nowhere. The flame returns. The memory endures. Soon… the chains will break.

Aarion's body locked in terror. He wanted to scream, to run, but his feet refused him.

The gloves flared brighter, as though defying the voice. For an instant, their white light pushed back the crimson glare.

But the eye only narrowed. And then it laughed.

The sound shattered the vision. Aarion collapsed onto the Oval's cracked soil, chest heaving, sweat drenching his tunic. His hands shook uncontrollably, the gloves dim now but alive with faint whispers.

He pressed them against the earth, whispering to himself, half-plea, half-denial: "I'm not ready. I'm not ready. I'm not,"

From the shadows of the stands, Elira's voice cut in, colder than the night wind. "You won't get to choose readiness."

Aarion spun, startled, finding her standing there, arms crossed, eyes hard but hiding something softer beneath.

Nyssa emerged a moment later, clearly having followed too. Her voice trembled with anger. "What were you thinking, coming back here alone? Do you have a death wish?"

Aarion looked between them, his throat dry, no words forming. The memory of the crimson eye lingered in his skull, burning into him like a brand.

He finally whispered the only truth he could: "Something's coming. And it knows me."

Both girls fell silent, the weight of his words sinking into them. Above them, the clouds thickened, veiling the moon. The Oval's cracks glowed once more, faint but steady, like the heartbeat of something buried,something waiting.

The day did not bring peace. If anything, Lumeria's pulse grew heavier, every street charged with the aftershock of the Oval's collapse. Vendors who once shouted cheerfully now spoke in hushed tones, glancing over their shoulders as if fire might erupt from the cobblestones. Children no longer played cricket but at mock battles, crowning one boy as Aarion, another as a monster in crimson chains, reenacting what their parents feared. Rumor had become ritual, and in that ritual Aarion's name was both curse and prayer.

High in his tower, Archmage Seraphius stood alone, staring into the Everlight Staff's core. Its glow had dimmed since the Oval, as though it too recoiled from what it had witnessed. The Archmage's thoughts were troubled, though his face betrayed nothing. He whispered to the crystal, words older than the city itself.

“The vessel awakens sooner than the tides foretold. The Crimson Crown stirs, its eye pressing against the veil. And yet,he is still a child.” The staff’s glow flickered in response, not with words but with resonance, the language of relics that only Seraphius could hear. He closed his eyes, the weight of centuries heavy upon his shoulders. “Then perhaps it is true. The chains beneath us grow weaker. If so, Lumeria stands at the edge of memory’s return.”

Aarion, unaware of the Archmage’s vigil, walked the healer’s courtyard with Nyssa and Elira shadowing close behind. He had begged for fresh air, but every face they passed burned with accusation. A fruit-seller pulled her baskets away as he approached. A child pointed at his hands, whispering to his mother before being hushed and tugged aside. Even the guards stationed at the courtyard gates stiffened, hands twitching toward blades they dared not draw. Aarion kept his eyes down, heat crawling in his chest. Every step felt like trespass in his own city.

Nyssa muttered curses under her breath at anyone who dared look too long, her grip on her daggers restless. Elira, however, observed silently, her scholar’s mind cataloging the divide, the way fear wove quicker than truth. Aarion finally stopped beneath the shadow of a lone ash tree. “I didn’t ask for this,” he whispered, his voice raw. “I only wanted to play. To be someone. Not this.”

Nyssa crouched beside him, her tone fierce. “Then screw them. You’re still Aarion to me. If they can’t see that, they’re blind.”

Elira’s gaze lingered on him, not unkind but relentless. “You cannot outrun what you are becoming. Pretend all you like, but the chains beneath this land recognize you already. Denial will not silence them.”

Aarion looked up sharply, her words striking too close to the vision still seared into his mind. The crimson eye behind the gate, its laughter echoing. He clenched his fists, the gloves pulsing faintly in response. “I don’t want to be recognized,” he hissed. “Not by them. Not by anyone.”

For a moment silence hung between them, heavy and unyielding. Then Nyssa stood, planting herself firmly at his side. “Well, tough luck. Because like it or not, you are recognized. So either you let it break you, or you decide what it means.”

Elira’s eyes narrowed but she did not argue. Instead she glanced toward the horizon, where storm clouds gathered with unnatural speed. “The world is already deciding, Nyssa. Whether we are ready or not.”

Far beneath their feet, deep in chambers older than the city, something stirred. The cracks from the Oval had spread like veins, carrying whispers into the hidden

caverns below. Shadows rippled against sealed doors, and for a fleeting moment the chains trembled.

And miles away, in a fortress carved from obsidian cliffs, Malgorath the Eternal raised his head from the circle of flame in which he brooded. His eyes, twin voids of crimson fire, flickered with sudden hunger. He had felt it,the tremor of awakening, the faint pulse of fire that once defied him. A smile, sharp and cruel, spread across his withered face. “So the vessel returns,” he murmured. “The game stirs again.” His laugh rolled across the stones, a sound like death’s promise. His lieutenants stirred uneasily, but none dared question. For Malgorath had waited centuries for this, and patience was a weapon he wielded as deftly as flame.

Back in Lumeria, Aarion felt a chill crawl down his spine though no wind stirred. He pressed his palms against the gloves, whispering words he did not understand. The relics pulsed, alive, listening. And in their warmth, a faint voice stirred, too quiet to hear but undeniable all the same. He froze, breath caught in his throat, realizing that the gloves were no longer only conduits of power. They were whispering back.

Lumeria’s streets had never been so loud with silence. Where once vendors shouted their prices, now they murmured prayers, their hands twitching toward charms as Aarion’s name was whispered like both blessing and curse. The city guard doubled their patrols, not for crime

but to keep watch on ordinary citizens who had begun to gather in suspicious knots, exchanging frightened words. It was not rebellion yet, but the tension in the air was a rope pulled taut, ready to snap.

The royal court moved quietly to control it. Spies slipped through the markets disguised as beggars and traders, feeding back reports to Princess Calistra. In her chambers she spread scrolls across her desk, marking which districts leaned toward reverence of Aarion and which leaned toward fear. “The city is splitting in half,” she muttered, her fingers tapping in sharp rhythm. “One half waits for a savior. The other half waits for his downfall. Both halves are dangerous.”

Beyond the city, in the fortress of obsidian cliffs, Malgorath’s war council convened in the Chamber of Ash. Flames licked across braziers carved from dragon bone, casting the generals’ faces into sharp relief. Zorath Bloodpyre leaned forward, his eyes burning almost as hot as his pyromancer’s crown. “If the vessel has awakened, let us march now. Strike before the fire learns to wield itself.” Across the chamber, Azmara Nightthorn smirked, her voice like silk soaked in poison. “And draw every sword in Lumeria to our throats? No, Zorath. Fire left too long will always burn brighter. Let it ripen, let it consume him from within. Then, when the boy burns out, the kingdom will be ash before he knows it.”

Drakthar Morvain's scarred hand curled into a fist. "Your riddles disgust me, witch. The boy is dangerous already. I can smell the flame even across the sea. If Malgorath commands, I will ride tonight and bring back his head."

From the shadows of his throne, Malgorath laughed softly. The sound silenced them all. "No," he said, his voice deep as the grave. "The vessel is mine. He must see me before he dies. He must know the futility of fire against eternity. Until then, watch the skies, and let Lumeria choke on its own doubt." His gaze burned into the flames before him, and the braziers shivered. "Chains tremble. The time is closer than you think."

Back in Lumeria, Aarion woke in the dead of night. His breath caught as he felt it again,the whisper. At first it had been only warmth, the faint pulse of fire through the gloves. Now, words formed, curling like smoke into his mind. Listen. The voice was neither male nor female, neither kind nor cruel. It was old. It was a memory itself. Aarion sat up, his pulse racing. Nyssa stirred from her chair by the door but did not wake fully. He stared at his hands, whispering aloud. "Listen to what?"

The gloves burned hotter, and suddenly visions struck him,faster this time, sharper, as if the relics had lost patience. He saw flashes: an army of fire clashing against shadow; a tower crumbling under crimson skies; a woman with silver hair holding the Everlight Staff, tears streaking her face; a dragon of flame chained

beneath black stone. The images seared him until he gasped aloud. Then the voice came again, clearer now, spoken directly into his blood. We remember. You must remember too.

Aarion clutched his chest, his body trembling with the weight of it. He whispered, terrified, “What am I supposed to remember?” But the gloves only dimmed, their warmth fading back into silence.

In his tower, Archmage Seraphius felt the surge from afar. He stood over a great circle etched into the floor, symbols glowing faintly as he placed his staff at its center. He had begun the Ritual of Echoes, a spell used not to alter fate but to measure its tremors. The circle flared, showing him ripples across the fabric of Aetheria. Shadows gathered in the north. Fire trembled in the east. And beneath the city, the chains glowed faintly crimson. His hands tightened on the staff. “Too soon,” he whispered. “Far too soon.”

The storm outside deepened, thunder rolling though no rain fell. Citizens woke uneasily in their beds, children whimpered in their sleep, and somewhere deep beneath the Oval, the cracks spread another inch, unseen and unheeded.

Aarion pressed his palms to the gloves, heart hammering, trying to silence the voice. But even in silence he felt it, the weight of centuries pressing against

his chest. He was no longer only himself. He was carrying a memory that was not his own, and somewhere far away, enemies who had waited lifetimes now stirred with hunger at the scent of his awakening.

The storm that had gathered through the night refused to break, lingering over Lumeria as if the heavens themselves watched with unease. Thunder rumbled like the growl of some sleeping beast, but no rain fell to cleanse the streets. The city moved under its shadow, restless and wary. Aarion had tried to rest again after the whispers of the gloves, but his sleep was fractured, haunted by visions that slipped through the cracks of his mind. When morning came, he felt no relief. Nyssa had refused to leave his side, her usual bravado laced now with an edge of nervous energy she tried and failed to mask. Elira had been silent, withdrawn into her own thoughts, though every so often her eyes darted to Aarion with an intensity that suggested she was turning over every word of the Archmage in her mind.

By midday, word had spread that Queen Elendra herself would make a public address in the Grand Plaza. Citizens gathered in anxious clusters, some eager for reassurance, others muttering their suspicion. Aarion wanted to stay hidden, but the summons for him to attend were not optional. Flanked by Nyssa and Elira, he walked through the crowded streets under the watch of armed guards. The murmur of the crowd followed him like a tide, swelling with each step. Faces turned, eyes

narrowed or widened, whispers flared like sparks. A boy shouted that he was their savior, only to be hushed by his frightened mother. A man spat at the ground, cursing the day fire was born among them. Aarion kept his eyes fixed on the flagstones, his jaw tight, his gloves burning faintly as if aware of the scrutiny.

In the plaza, the Queen stood upon a high balcony draped in banners of silver and blue. King Roderic stood beside her, his frame stern and unyielding. When she raised her hand, the restless murmur fell to silence. Her voice, when it came, carried with quiet strength across the square. She did not deny the Oval's collapse, nor did she dismiss the fear in her people's hearts. Instead, she spoke of trials that had tested Lumeria before, of storms that had passed though they seemed unending. She named Aarion not as monster, nor yet as savior, but as one who bore a gift the city did not yet understand. "We must not turn our fear into chains," she said, her words threading calmly into the crowd. "We must guard him as we would guard the flame that lights our homes. For fire can destroy, yes, but it can also keep the darkness at bay."

The speech steadied many, though not all. From the edges of the crowd, Aarion could feel eyes that remained hard, untrusting, shadows that whispered dissent. Yet for the moment, the city held. The Queen's presence was enough to bind them, though the silence afterward felt more like a fragile truce than true peace.

That night, Aarion lay awake again, staring at the faint glow of the gloves. Nyssa had finally dozed in her chair, her daggers balanced loosely in her lap, while Elira pored over scrolls by candlelight, her face taut with concentration. Aarion flexed his fingers, the gloves humming softly. The voice came again, not a whisper this time but a low thrum inside his bones. Beneath the crown, beneath the chains. Seek, and remember. He bolted upright, his breath catching. The words had formed clearly, spoken into the marrow of his being. He whispered back, afraid of waking the others. “Beneath the crown? What crown? What chains?” But there was no reply.

Far away, in the fortress of obsidian, Malgorath’s attention snapped suddenly as the same tremor shuddered through the fabric of Aetheria. He rose from his throne, eyes burning like coals, and his generals stirred at the movement. Azmara lifted her head, her smile thin and knowing. “The relic speaks to him now.” Zorath’s growl filled the chamber. “Then the time for waiting is over. Let me burn the city before he learns its secrets.” Malgorath raised a hand, silencing him. His voice carried like the crack of a tomb sealing. “No. Not yet. The relics will guide him to the chains, and when he finds them, he will not know whether he is their master or their prisoner. That is when we strike. When hope itself is tangled in fear.”

In Lumeria, Seraphius stood once more within his circle of runes. The Everlight Staff pulsed faintly as his eyes glimmered with the weight of visions only he could see. He had felt the gloves' whisper as keenly as Aarion had, though from afar. He muttered words that seemed both prayer and warning. "The boy walks a path older than kings. If he finds the chains too soon, the Crimson Crown will rise unchecked. But if he falters, the world will burn. Either way, the hourglass empties." His hand tightened on the staff, and for a moment, the runes beneath him flickered as if resisting the truth.

Aarion, restless in his chamber, rose and pressed his hands against the cold stone wall. The gloves pulsed again, faint but insistent. Images flickered before his eyes: a crown wrought of flame and shadow, a throne broken into shards, chains that coiled endlessly beneath the earth. He gasped, clutching at the vision, but it slipped away like smoke. Still, the words echoed through him long after the glow faded. Beneath the crown, beneath the chains. He did not know their meaning, but he knew with a certainty that chilled his blood that his life had already been bound to them.

The Queen's words settled over the Grand Plaza like fragile glass, calming enough to stop the riot but too thin to withstand a single stone. For every villager who bowed their head in trust, there was another who clenched their fists, muttering that fire should not be sheltered in the heart of the kingdom. A pair of men

broke into shouts at the plaza's edge,one swearing Aarion would be Lumeria's savior, the other calling him Malgorath's seed. Guards intervened quickly, but the voices echoed long after the men were dragged apart. Aarion felt each accusation like an arrow, and even Nyssa's protective curses could not keep his heart from sinking.

In the upper tiers of the palace, Princess Calistra watched through jeweled windows, her mind racing. The Queen's wisdom had steadied the moment, but Calistra knew better than to rely on words alone. She traced a line across her map of Lumeria, marking districts with ink: allies, enemies, undecided. Aarion was a storm,and storms could be steered. If the people believed in him, he would be a banner to rally behind. If they feared him, he would be a leash for the throne to hold. Either way, she intended to ensure that his destiny bent to her will, not the other way around.

That night, Aarion's dreams betrayed him again. He fell into them not gently but as if dragged beneath the waves, his consciousness pulled by the gloves' pulse. He stood on a battlefield that stretched beyond sight, the ground blackened by flame and shadow. Broken banners lay scattered, their sigils unfamiliar yet heavy with meaning. Chains as vast as rivers coiled across the land, glowing faintly crimson, their ends vanishing into the storm-choked sky. From the horizon, armies of fire and shadow clashed, their weapons leaving scars in the very

earth. At the center stood a figure,tall, armored, his blade burning white against the tide of darkness. Aarion could not see his face, but he felt the same pulse in that warrior's hands that now lived in his own gloves. Malgorath rose to meet him, wreathed in flame as black as night, their clash shaking the world.

The vision cracked apart as Aarion screamed himself awake, his chest heaving, sweat freezing on his skin. Nyssa nearly toppled from her chair, daggers drawn, while Elira rushed to his side with her scholar's urgency. "What did you see?" she demanded, her voice sharp. Aarion gasped, clutching his gloves. "Chains. A battlefield. Someone… someone wearing these before me." His voice broke, and Elira's face paled at the confirmation of what she had long suspected but not spoken: that Aarion was not the first vessel of flame.

Far away, Archmage Seraphius knelt within his circle once more. The Everlight Staff pulsed weakly, drained from his repeated invocations. He whispered lines of an old prophecy, half-remembered and half-feared. "When the chains tremble, the crown will rise. Fire will awaken where it should not, and the vessel will either guard the world or break it." His eyes closed, the weight of his centuries pressing into his bones. He knew the boy had seen the battlefield, for the vision was no mere dream but a memory the relics had carried forward. Seraphius's hands trembled as he admitted the truth aloud. "The Crown is beneath us still. And it remembers."

In the obsidian fortress, Malgorath summoned his lieutenants again. Shadows stretched unnaturally across the chamber, and his generals bowed low as he spoke. “He has seen,” Malgorath hissed, his voice thick with cruel delight. “The relics have begun to show him the chains. Good. Let the boy drown in visions he cannot control. His fear will poison him faster than any blade.” Azmara’s smile widened, her jeweled fingers tracing the rim of her goblet. “And when he falters, the city will turn on him itself. We won’t need to raise a single torch.” Malgorath’s laugh rolled like thunder. “Exactly. A kingdom that burns itself saves us the trouble.”

Aarion sat long into the night, unable to shake the vision. The gloves still glowed faintly, as if alive, waiting for him to ask the right question. He whispered into the silence, his voice trembling. “Who was he? Why do you remember him? Why me?” No answer came, only the faint thrum of power beneath his skin. But the words it had spoken earlier returned to him again and again, haunting every heartbeat. Beneath the crown, beneath the chains. He did not know what it meant, but he knew it was not only a warning,it was a summons.

And far below, in the cracks that split the Oval’s ruins, something stirred. The chains there glowed faintly crimson, as if answering a call.The night air in Lumeria carried an unnatural stillness, as though the storm above had bent the world into silence. Aarion stood at the edge of the fractured Oval, the ruins lit by lanterns and the

faint shimmer of wards still trying to hold the place together. His gloves pulsed faintly, the warmth uncomfortable yet magnetic, as though they longed for something buried beneath the stone. Nyssa shifted uneasily beside him, her eyes scanning the shadows for threats she could not name. Elira held herself straighter, though her hands trembled where they clutched the folds of her robe.

Then the air shifted. It was not thunder, nor the weight of gathering crowds, but a presence that bent the space around it. Seraphius Deymar appeared not in a blaze of fire but in a quiet ripple of power, as though the world itself had been waiting for his step. The broken wards steadied at once, their unstable glow becoming calm, and the Oval seemed to exhale relief. Whispers passed through the remaining guards: “The Archmage…” Their voices trembled with reverence, as if a figure from legend had stepped out of the story into flesh.

Aarion froze. The silver-haired mage moved with a poise that belonged not to men but to inevitability. His Everlight Staff glowed with restrained power, its light casting no shadows, as though even darkness dared not offend him. His eyes, pale as dawn, fell on Aarion, and in that gaze the boy felt both comfort and dread. Seraphius did not speak at once; he merely regarded Aarion, and the silence itself became a command.

When he finally spoke, his voice was calm, low, yet resonant. “Do you know why your gloves burned tonight?” Aarion flinched, his throat tight. He wanted to deny it, to insist he knew nothing, but the words stuck. He forced a whisper. “They… they weren’t supposed to.” Seraphius tilted his head, almost pitying. “Not supposed to? These are not mere gauntlets, child. They are relics. Forged when the Crimson Sky last tore through the heavens, shaped by hands that bled to bind what could not be destroyed. They remember what you do not.”

The gloves grew warm at his words, as if stirred by recognition. Aarion’s heart thudded painfully. “Relics? Then why me?” Seraphius’ gaze sharpened, not unkind but unyielding. “Because fire remembers fire. Because the chains below stir when the vessel above awakens. You are not chosen, boy. You are found.”

Nyssa stepped forward, her voice sharp, protective. “You’re not making sense. If you know what’s happening, then tell him,don’t speak in riddles while he burns alive in his own skin.” For the first time, Seraphius looked at her, and the sheer weight of his presence made her breath falter. Yet he did not rebuke her. Instead, he turned back to Aarion. “You have stepped onto a field much larger than your games. The Shadow Falcons you faced tonight are not rivals,they are pawns of something older. The cracks in this ground are not accidents,they

are wounds reopening. And your gloves are not weapons,they are memories trying to speak."

Elira's voice broke softly, full of desperate need for clarity. "What do they want him to remember?" Seraphius' gaze deepened, and for a moment the air itself stilled. "What men have forgotten. The first war, the first chains, the crown that was buried beneath this very city. If it rises again, no wall will hold it back. The Crimson Sky was not a storm,it was a warning."

The words struck Aarion like cold steel. He wanted to demand more, to beg for an explanation, but his tongue felt heavy. His gloves flared hot, burning white, and for a moment he swore he heard the echo of that ancient battlefield again, chains rattling beneath the earth. He staggered, clutching his hands, but Seraphius lifted a finger and the light dimmed, calmed, obeying. "Learn to listen to them," the Archmage said. "They will guide you better than I can. But do not mistake guidance for safety. Fire remembers, but it also consumes."

Before Aarion could speak again, Seraphius raised his staff. Light flared briefly, and in the blink of an eye he was gone. The wards around the Oval dimmed back to their unstable state, and the silence that followed was heavier than any storm.

Nyssa rushed to Aarion's side, gripping his arm. "What did he tell you?" Her voice was sharp but fragile,

desperate for reassurance. Aarion looked at her, at Elira, at the ruined Oval glowing faintly with cracks, and then up at the sky where the last fragments of crimson shimmered like dying embers. His voice came low, a whisper only the night could hold. “That this is only the beginning.”

The gloves pulsed once, warm and heavy, and somewhere deep beneath Lumeria the chains stirred again.Aaron pressed his back against the ruined wall, his chest heaving as though his lungs themselves fought against the weight of prophecy. The gloves burned faintly, but this time the fire felt… deliberate. Like it was waiting for his choice.

“No,” he whispered to himself. “I won’t be your vessel. I won’t.”

For a heartbeat, the glow dimmed,then flared brighter, searing his skin until his cry tore through the silence. The fissures answered at once, glowing like veins of blood across the ground. Seraphius turned sharply, his staff blazing to hold the cracks at bay.

“You cannot reject them,” the Archmage said, his voice both weary and merciless. “The relics awaken only when the world itself breaks. If you deny them, they will consume you instead.”

Aarion wanted to shout back, to curse him, to demand why it had to be him. But in the stillness that followed,

he caught something he was not meant to hear. Seraphius whispered under his breath, words not for the boy but for himself:

“Too soon. Far too soon. The vessel should not have awakened yet…”

A chill ran through Aarion’s spine. The prophecy itself was wrong. Whatever was happening, it was earlier, faster,more dangerous than even the Archmage had foreseen.

That night, sleep betrayed him. His body collapsed into exhaustion, but his mind was not his own. He found himself standing once more before the chained gate, its fiery links straining, trembling as though eager to snap.

From the shadows beyond, a voice slid like poison into his skull.

“You fight them. You cling to denial. But you already know the truth, don’t you, boy?”

Aarion spun, terror seizing him. The crowned figure stepped forward, eyes burning void, his smile sharp as broken glass.

“You are mine.”

“No!” Aarion screamed, his voice cracking, but the figure only laughed,a sound that shook the chains until

one of them cracked, spilling a river of crimson fire into the void.

Then the voice whispered something that froze Aarion's blood. Not a threat, not a curse, but his name,his true name, one he had never spoken to anyone in Lumeria.

The vision shattered. Aarion bolted awake, drenched in sweat, the gloves glowing faintly with new runes he did not recognize. Nyssa stirred instantly, daggers flashing. Elira's voice was sharp, trembling. "What did you see this time?"

Aarion shook his head violently, unable to speak. He could still hear the whisper in his bones, too sharp, too real to be just memory.

Far beneath Lumeria, the chains groaned again. And this time, the cracks spread not only through the Oval, but outward,splintering into the streets, the hills, the fields beyond. Villages woke to trembling earth, wells bursting with red light, children crying as fire licked at their doorsteps.

The Crimson Sky was not returning.

It was already here.

Aarion sat slumped against the fractured wall of the healer's quarters, his body trembling as though it no longer belonged to him. The gloves still pulsed faintly, a

steady rhythm of light and heat, but now their glow was less like fire and more like chains , inescapable, binding. His breaths came shallow, each one scraping against his throat as if the air itself resisted him.

Nyssa crouched beside him, her hand gripping his shoulder with stubborn ferocity. “We need to leave, Aarion. Tonight. Before the guards or the priests come looking for you.” Her voice was sharp, but beneath it trembled fear she could not mask.

Across the room, Elira stood with her arms crossed, her expression tight and unreadable. “Running will only confirm their suspicions,” she said flatly. “If he flees, he’ll be branded not just cursed but traitor. The Council will hunt him, and every whisper in the city will turn against him.”

Nyssa snapped her head up, glare flashing. “So what? You want him to stay here, in a city that already wants him dead? You saw their faces, Elira! They were ready to tear him apart with their bare hands!”

Elira’s composure cracked for the briefest instant. “And you think wandering into the wilds will save him? The fissures aren’t just here anymore. I’ve heard reports,farms splitting, wells burning with crimson light. The world itself is hunting him, Nyssa. Where do you think you can run that the earth won’t follow?”

The two girls locked eyes, fury sparking between them, but Aarion barely heard them. His mind was elsewhere, trapped in the echo of Seraphius's words. Too soon. Far too soon.

The relics had awakened before their time.

Which meant even the Archmage was afraid.

The Whispering Relics

That night, when Nyssa and Elira had finally fallen into restless sleep , Nyssa slumped in a chair with her daggers across her lap, Elira curled against the window, parchment still clutched in her hand , Aarion lay awake. The silence of the healer's quarters pressed around him, broken only by the faint crackle of a torch outside the door.

And then he heard it.

Not a vision. Not an image.

A voice.

Faint, broken, rasping like breath dragged across stone, yet undeniable. It rose from the gloves pressed against his chest, curling into his mind.

"Beneath… the chains… lies the crown…"

Aarion bolted upright, his heart hammering so hard he thought it might shatter his ribs. He stared at his hands, whispering frantically, “What? What does that mean? What crown? What chains?”

The glow from the gloves flickered, dimmed, and then went silent again. But Aarion knew he had heard it. Real words this time. Not just visions.

He pressed his palms over his ears, as if to block it out, but the words echoed inside his skull long after the light had faded.

Rumors in Lumeria

By dawn, the city had transformed into a hive of whispers. The Oval’s collapse was on every lip, shaping itself into rumor and prophecy faster than truth could breathe.

In the markets, priests thundered that Aarion was cursed, the Crimson Sky’s herald sent to punish them for pride. They urged citizens to pray, to burn offerings, to shun the boy before his fire consumed them all.

In the alleys, thieves smirked and hawked counterfeit relics , gloves stitched with glowing paint, trinkets with shards of broken lanterns. “Touch them,” one thief hissed to a wide-eyed boy. “They’ll keep the cracks from your door.”

Children, too young to fear properly, had already turned the disaster into play. In the cobbled courtyards they shrieked and laughed, one boy holding a charred stick for a staff, another pretending to be Aarion, his hands glowing with chalk. They re-enacted the Oval's collapse until their parents yanked them away, their laughter silenced by sharp words.

And in the taverns, the debate burned hotter than any ale. Some swore Aarion was destined, chosen by flame to save them. Others spat into their mugs, muttering that hope was just another word for fire before it burned you alive.

The city was no longer one. It was splintered, divided, holding its breath for whichever story proved true.

Far above the restless markets, in the marble halls of the royal keep, the Council of Lumeria gathered. The chamber was vast, its vaulted ceiling painted with constellations that seemed to flicker in the torchlight. Normally, these meetings carried the stiff air of politics , land disputes, tax decrees, the dull grind of governance. Tonight, however, the chamber buzzed with a fear so raw it made even the marble walls seem fragile.

Lord Branthor Eldane, his armor polished to a blinding gleam, slammed a gauntleted fist on the long table. "I say we act now. The boy is a threat. Did none of you see

the Oval? He split the very ground with his breath! What will he shatter next , the palace? The city itself?"

Several councilors muttered agreement, their voices thin and frightened.

Princess Calistra Vorn leaned forward, her jeweled circlet glinting. "And yet," she said smoothly, "the Archmage himself appeared. He did not strike the boy down. He did not bind him. He spoke to him. Warned him. If Seraphius Deymar sees worth in Aarion Veylan, who are we to call the boy enemy?"

Branthor sneered. "Seraphius has gone soft. He coddles children and whispers riddles while the ground cracks beneath us. I will not gamble our kingdom's safety on the whim of an old man who lives more in memory than in the present."

The words stung the room like a blade. Even the torches seemed to flicker uneasily.

King Roderic Greywing stood, his broad shoulders stiff with strain. "Enough. You will not slander the Archmage in this hall." His voice cut through the chamber with a soldier's authority. "But Branthor is not wrong. The boy is dangerous. What course do you suggest, Seraphius?"

The doors opened at that exact moment, as if summoned by the king's words.

Seraphius Deymar entered, his silver hair catching the torchlight, his Everlight Staff glowing in quiet resonance. He did not bow. He did not explain. He simply walked to the center of the chamber, and the murmurs died at once.

“You waste breath,” he said softly, though every corner of the hall carried his words. “The relics have already been chosen. Whether you crown him or curse him, it matters little. The boy is awakened. The world has already bound him.”

Uneasy silence followed. Some lowered their eyes. Others clenched their fists in frustration.

Queen Elendra Vaeloria, calm as still water, tapped one finger against the arm of her throne. “Then we prepare,” she said quietly. “If the vessel has awakened, then both hope and ruin walk among us. Watch the skies. Guard the cracks. And pray the boy learns to wield what has claimed him.”

Malgorath’s Fortress

Far to the north, beyond seas whipped by storm and mountains blackened by flame, a fortress carved of obsidian cliffs shuddered with unnatural life. Shadows slithered across its walls as if the stone itself were bleeding.

Within, in the Chamber of Ash, Malgorath the Eternal brooded upon his throne. His eyes , twin voids of crimson fire , flickered as he lifted his head. Around him, his lieutenants stood in uneasy formation.

Zorath Bloodpyre, his crown of embers burning ceaselessly, growled low. “The vessel has stirred. I felt it. Let us march now. Burn the kingdom before the boy learns to wield what he carries.”

Across from him, Azmara Nightthorn smirked, her jeweled fingers tracing the rim of a goblet. “And draw every sword of Lumeria to our throats? No, Zorath. Fire left too long always burns brighter. Let him simmer in fear. Let his city turn on him. Hope poisoned from within is sweeter than any blade.”

Drakthar Morvain slammed a scarred fist against his chestplate. “The boy is dangerous already. I smelled his flame across the sea. If you command it, master, I will ride tonight and bring back his head.”

Malgorath’s laughter rolled across the chamber, deep as shifting earth. It silenced them all.

“No,” he said, his voice like iron cracking. “The vessel is mine. He must see me before he dies. He must learn that fire means nothing against eternity. Until then… let the boy’s own people sharpen the knife that will strike him.”

The generals bowed low. Malgorath's smile widened, sharp and cruel.

"Chains tremble," he whispered. "The time is closer than they dream."

Aarion's Nightmares

That night, Aarion's sleep betrayed him again.

He fell into it not gently but as though dragged beneath the surface of a black ocean. His vision blurred, then cleared into a battlefield unlike any dream he had known.

The sky was aflame, crimson clouds writhing as lightning carved through them in streaks of black. Below, armies clashed , shadows surging against warriors who wielded relics burning with white fire. Swords, axes, shields , each glowing as his gloves glowed, each resisting the storm.

Aarion stumbled through the chaos, his ears filled with screams, his eyes stinging with smoke. Then he saw him.

A man stood at the center, tall, armored, his blade blazing with the same light as Aarion's hands. The warrior's stance was steady, his strikes precise, his every motion carrying the weight of destiny. And though

Aarion could not see his face clearly, something in the tilt of his head, the shape of his shoulders, felt horribly familiar.

It was him.

Or at least, someone who looked like him.

Aarion's breath caught. The world tilted. And then the crowned figure emerged from the smoke, mounted on a black horse, his eyes burning void. His laughter shook the battlefield.

"So," he said, his voice echoing through every corner of Aarion's mind. "You return. Again and again. Different names. Different faces. But always the same flame."

The chains in the sky above groaned, and one of them snapped with a sound like mountains breaking. Crimson fire poured through the gap, flooding the world with light.

The crowned figure leaned closer, his voice curling into Aarion's bones.

"You are mine, boy. My heir. Whether you burn or whether you bow , you are mine."

Aarion screamed , and the battlefield shattered.The Fractures Spread

The days that followed were not quiet.

The earth itself betrayed them.

Beyond Lumeria's shining walls, farmers woke to find cracks glowing in their fields, scarring the soil where their grain once grew. Wells boiled with light, scalding water into steam. Shepherds returned to find entire pastures split, sheep scattered, ground trembling beneath their feet.

Travelers whispered of roads that bled fire, of villages swallowed whole in the night. Fear spreads faster than truth. The Crimson Return, the priests began calling it , the sign that the end of the age had come again.

And everywhere, in every rumor, Aarion's name festered.

The Clash of Friends

In the healer's quarters, tension thickened like smoke.

Nyssa paced like a caged wolf, her daggers flashing in her restless hands. "We can't stay here. Every guard in the city looks at him like he's a weapon about to explode." She turned sharply, her braid snapping across her shoulder. "We leave tonight. Head east. Vanish."

Elira shot to her feet, her voice razor-sharp. "Run where? Did you not hear Seraphius? The cracks are not bound to the Oval , they follow him. He is the fissure. Wherever he goes, the ground will break."

Nyssa's eyes flared. "So what? You'd rather chain him here? Let your council puppeteers use him as their weapon? At least outside he has a chance!"

Aarion buried his face in his hands, the gloves pulsing hotly against his skin. Their voices clashed like steel, each word cutting deeper.

Finally, he snapped. His fists slammed into the stone floor. "Stop!"

The room shook. Dust cascaded from the beams above. The cracks in the walls pulsed faintly, glowing red in rhythm with his cry.

Nyssa staggered back. Elira froze.

Aarion's chest heaved, his eyes wild. "I never asked for this! I don't want to be chosen, cursed, or whatever you call it! I just wanted to play!"

The silence afterward was deafening, broken only by the faint hiss of the relics, whispering heat into the air.

Return to the Oval

That night, when the city slept uneasily beneath storm-thick clouds, Aarion slipped away.

Nyssa stirred in her chair, but exhaustion kept her from waking. Elira, head bent over scattered scrolls, did not notice his rise. The gloves burned faintly, tugging at him,

guiding his steps as though his feet no longer obeyed his will.

He found himself once more at the Oval's ruins.

The cracked earth glowed faintly beneath the moonlight, veins of fire winding outward like a map of scars. Aarion stood at the center, his heart hammering. The relics pulsed harder, white light spilling across his knuckles.

Then he heard it again.

The chains.

The gate.

The world around him dissolved in fire and shadow.

The Gate Opens

He stood once more in the cavern , vast, endless, black stone walls scorched by flame. The great gate loomed before him, bound in chains of living fire. Only this time, the chains no longer strained in silence.

They groaned.

They snapped.

One link shattered with a thunderclap, a river of crimson fire pouring through the breach. Aarion stumbled backward, his hands raised against the heat, but the

gloves only burned brighter, as though greeting the storm.

And then the eye opened.

Crimson. Ancient. Patient.

It fixed on him, piercing through flesh, through thought, into marrow. Aarion's breath caught in his throat.

The voice filled the cavern, deep and merciless.

"A familiar vessel. The flame returns. The memory endures."

A pause. The chains trembled as though savoring the moment.

"You are mine… my heir."

The words struck him harder than any blow. Aarion staggered, his mind fracturing under their weight. He tried to scream, but his voice was swallowed by the roar of fire.

The laughter followed , sharp, endless, echoing into every crack of his soul.

Collapse

Aarion collapsed onto the Oval's soil, his gloves dimming to embers, his body trembling as though lightning had crawled through his veins.

When Nyssa and Elira found him moments later, he was half-conscious, his lips moving with broken words.

"He… knew me…"

The cracks beneath the Oval pulsed once, brighter than ever, as if answering him.

And high above, storm clouds swirled faster, red light bleeding faintly through their edges.

The Crimson Sky was not coming.

It had already begun.

Aarion's journey is far from over… The fire still awaits…

Characters

Aarion Veylan *– Age 15 – Born* ***3rd March 2009***

Nyssa Moonveil *– Age 15 – Born* ***19th December 2009***

Torric Karthis *– Age 16 – Born* ***27th April 2008***

Elira (Starcrest / Windfern) *– Age 15 – Born* ***8th June 2009***

Kaelen Duskbane *– Age 17 – Born* ***22nd October 2007***

Kaelith Draven *– Age 18 – Born* ***10th November 2006***

Seraphius Deymar *– Age 72 – Born* ***1st January 1952***

Thalen Myrris *– Age 34 – Born* ***14th July 1990***

Vaeloris (Archmage) *– Age 68 – Born* ***25th March 1956***

Azmara Nightthorn *– Age 28 – Born* ***6th December 1996***

Branthor Eldane *– Age 42 – Born* ***2nd September 1982***

Calistra Vorn *– Age 31 – Born* ***11th May 1993***

Draven Ashmoor *– Age 38 – Born* ***30th August 1986***

Drakthar Morvain *– Age 47 – Born* ***9th November 1977***

Elendra Vaeloria *– Age 21 – Born* ***16th April 2003***

King Roderic Greywing *– Age 55 – Born* ***12th February 1969***

Lady Aravelle *– Age 49 – Born* ***20th June 1975***

Luthien *– Age 19 – Born* ***7th December 2005***

Lyraen Solmist *– Age 22 – Born* ***18th March 2002***

Malgorath *– Age: Unknown – Date of Birth: Lost to time*

Morvash *– Age 45 – Born* ***4th October 1979***

Morwen Nightshade *– Age 36 – Born* ***13th August 1988***

Roderin *– Age 27 – Born* ***28th April 1997***

Serenya Duskvale *– Age 24 – Born* ***5th December 2000***

Sylas Crowmere *– Age 40 – Born* ***21st July 1984***

Tavra *– Age 18 – Born* ***15th May 2006***

Thalen Brightforge *– Age 44 – Born* ***2nd February 1980***

Tharos Ironfang *– Age 33 – Born* ***29th March 1991***

Valira Frostglen *– Age 26 – Born* ***12th December 1998***

Veyra Nocturne *– Age 23 – Born* ***8th August 2001***

Zorath Bloodpyre *– Age 41 – Born* ***19th November 1983***

The Spire's Secret

It is said that the Whispering Spire is not merely a tower of stone and shadow, but a living archive of memories,an echo of every soul that has ever touched the fabric of Aetheria. Each whisper within its halls is a fragment of truth, a broken shard of destiny, calling out to those who dare to listen.

Some scholars of the ancient order believe that the Spire exists simultaneously across many realms, a bridge where time folds upon itself. To stand within its core is to hear not only the past but also the future,voices of those yet unborn, cries of battles yet unfought, and songs of victories yet unsung.

The Mark, carried by Aarion, is said to be the key that aligns the soul of the bearer with the Spire's infinite

echoes. It binds hero and tower together, weaving them into a single prophecy that cannot be severed.

Yet there are others who whisper that the Spire is not a gift, but a test. That every age, a chosen one rises,not to claim its power, but to resist it. For if the Spire's voice is followed blindly, it is not destiny that rules the bearer, but the Spire itself.

Perhaps the truth lies not in whether the Spire speaks or deceives, but in the courage of those who choose what to believe**.**

Glossary Of Terms

Aetheria – The mystical realm where the story unfolds, a land woven with magic, legends, and timeless prophecies.

The Whispering Spire – A mysterious tower that holds echoes of countless souls. Said to exist beyond time, it whispers truths, lies, and destinies to those who dare to listen.

The Mark – A sacred symbol carried by Aarion. It binds the bearer to the Spire and marks him as part of an ancient prophecy.

Emberlight – A legendary magical artifact (sometimes appearing as a train or relic) that connects worlds and carries chosen ones toward their destinies.

Luminaris – The great academy of knowledge and magic, where seekers of truth train in the arts of sorcery, prophecy, and wisdom.

Lumeria – One of the kingdoms of Aetheria, rich in culture and often caught between war and prophecy.

Shadow Creatures – Dark beings that serve the forces of evil, attacking villages and carrying out the will of darker masters.

Malgorath – A feared sorcerer and antagonist figure, said to command shadows and bend them to his will.

Seraphius Deymar – The Archmage of Luminaris and headmaster figure to Aarion. A wise and powerful sorcerer who guards the secrets of the Whispering Spire and guides the chosen hero through prophecy and peril.

The Prophecy – A timeless riddle that foretells the coming of a chosen one destined to stand before the Spire and determine the fate of Aetheria.

And Wait For...

Aarion Veylan and the Emberlight Trials...

Luminaris Academy